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"AND HE FELL ON HIS KNEES BESIDE HER."

SHE DID NOT LOVE HIM; Or, STOOPING TO CONQUER. BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

A WEDDING DECIDED ON.

"ARE you sure of what you are saying,

Helena? Don't keep me in this confounded suspense with your ridiculous hysterics!"

"She has—she has! It is true. The dear girl has accepted him!" sobbed Lady Fairdown, wiping away her fast-coming tears with her lace-edged handkerchief.

"Then, what on earth are you crying for?" almost roared Sir Bertram Fairdown, her husband. "Are you, or are you not, glad to get the girl provided for? Provided for, indeed!

She can hold up her head now with the tip-top people of the county! Is that what you are crying about, I should like to know?"

"I cannot bear to see our dear child unhappy, Bertram!"

"Unhappy!" cried he, with scornful wrath. "Unhappy, indeed! You might call her so, if she had not made this great catch. Then, my lady, you might have shed tears in plenty. For how would the case have stood had she persisted in refusing her good fortune? I cannot give her a penny, and she has eight brothers and sisters to share the same portion. Living up to my income, as I have done, with the position I have to keep up in this place, I a baronet belonging to an old family, a county magistrate, shall be very glad to borrow an odd thousand of the young fellow, *after* the wedding—not before. You won't catch me tripping like that. I will make sure of him first! It is all very well for you, Helena, to cry out about retrenchments in my own personal expenses; but when a man has been brought up as I was, in a luxurious home, where money was spent lavishly, he naturally contracts habits that would be extravagant in other men."

Lady Fairdown made no reply to this magniloquent speech. She was still trying to hush her inconvenient hysterical sobbing.

"What! Still at this farcical moaning about our penniless daughter's unexampled good luck? May I trouble you, then, Lady Fairdown, to carry yourself and your tears elsewhere for the present? And, also, if you have sufficient sense about you to do so, to send Elsie to me, that I may hear from her own mouth what she has pledged herself to with Lord Brookfield."

Lady Fairdown's evidences of grief and excitement were suddenly and unnaturally checked, as she rose hastily from the chair she had occupied in her husband's library, in which apartment this short dialogue had been carried on between the ill-matched pair.

"Stay!" shouted Sir Bertram, harshly, as she was retiring. "Stay! I will go and find Elsie. If she sees her mother crying because her daughter has at length come to her senses, of course the girl will take up the *role* of an injured darling, forced to marry against her will, with a host of other absurdities!"

And the Baronet strode from the library, leaving Lady Fairdown quite overcome with a new burst of weeping.

We will follow the Baronet as he ascends the broad staircase, and passes along a corridor, till he reaches a paneled door, at which he knocks hastily.

Hardly waiting for the faint "Come in" which reached his ear, he entered the small but pretty room, which, since she was seven-

teen—a year ago—Elsine has been permitted to use as her boudoir.

And here she sits now; but not occupied to-day with her drawings, her beautiful embroidery, her letters to her girl-friends, or her school-boy brothers, or with any of those occupations in which she usually delights.

No; she sits gazing on vacancy, with unnatural apathy, as she reflects on her brilliant prospects.

She was not weeping. She was very calm and still.

"Come in, papa," said she, in a voice which accorded with her whole aspect.

Her whole aspect! Ah, she was sad now, and cold, it is true; but how shall pen delineate faithfully that pure, girlish brow, high and fair, above which rich, dark hair waved in curves of indescribable charm and beauty; long, dark lashes, shading eyes which matched her hair in their glorious depth of color; delicate, well-cut features, an oval countenance, with a faint bloom, on a skin of exquisite fairness!

Add to all this the charm of refinement and good breeding, grace of movement, a musical voice, an elegance of outline in her slight form (which was above middle height), and you have the faint portrait of Elsie Fairdown, as she appeared on that day when she sat so apathetic, so chilled out of her usual joyous activity, greeting her father's summons with, "Come in, papa!"

"My dear child," began he, moderating his harsh tone somewhat, "what is all this I hear from your mother? Am I to understand that you have at last been sensible, and accepted Lord Brookfield?"

"Yes, papa. What you wish is done. I shall be Lady Brookfield," replied Elsie, in a voice from which all sparkle and life had fled.

"Is this actually decided?" asked Sir Bertram, in an eager tone.

"It is, father," returned the girl.

"Thank goodness! Ah, Elsie, you have done well—very well! I congratulate you, my dear," added he.

"You must not congratulate me, father," she rejoined, slowly and wearily.

"And why not? I should like to know why not?" (Raising his voice to a key more in accordance with that which he had adopted toward her mother). "Lord Brookfield is young, and rich, and handsome, and a thoroughly nice fellow. "Besides which, he is over head and ears in love with you, Elsie, and that is no small thing in his favor, though you set so light a value on it. And I presume that you hardly expect to find another property so large as that of Forest Court or Brookfield, both of which he owns, offered for your acceptance. What is it, then, that you object to in the young man and his belongings? I am curious to know; for, upon my word, I cannot guess unaided."

"Lord Brookfield is all that you say, father, and I am going to marry him. Let that be sufficient. But you must not expect me to say that I think I have done well. Oh, no! I have done very ill; for I do not love him."

"You will learn to do so—as far as necessary," said Sir Bertram.

"I have told him the truth—that I do not care for him, or to accept him would have been unpardonable!" cried Elsie, betraying for a moment how deeply she could feel, despite her cold exterior.

"Don't go on telling him such flattering things, then, if you please!" returned her father, almost savagely. "Since you have accepted him, make the best of a very good business."

Elsie was silent; but she shuddered slightly.

It was the remembrance of the same tones, so constantly used by her father, lately, toward her mother and herself, the recollection of bitter scenes of constant persecution, that had at length determined the young girl to end it all—to marry the persistent suitor whom she had seen but three times, and whom she did not love.

Had she been blest with a happier home; had her father been wise and tender, instead of harshly repellent and insistent, who knows but that affection might have blossomed in the heart which now turned with fright and dismay from the young fellow who had fallen so desperately in love with Elsie Fairdown at first sight of her.

They had met at a dance in the neighborhood, and for him the thing was concluded.

His ardent, hasty proposal frightened the girl.

He was a stranger, and she said "No," decidedly to his suit.

Then her father stormed, blamed her, said cutting words, and left her no peace; declared that if she did not make a good marriage, nothing was left her but to become a governess; that he had not a penny to give her, and finally insisted that she should see Lord Brookfield again.

Elsie reluctantly consented; but the girl had been chilled and terrified, and looked on her lover as being in league with her father, determined on bending her to his will, without regard for her happiness.

After a stormy scene with her sire (the blustering being entirely on his side; every timid word or sign of distress on her part being the signal for a new burst of anger from him), Elsie was still further agitated the next day by another visit from Lord Brookfield.

It was but a short interview, for he had been summoned by telegram to what seemed the death-bed of his mother, and could not now linger by his beloved; but at the first possible moment he would certainly return.

Might he hope that she would send a thought after him?—that she would try to think kindly of him whose mind would dwell on her unceasingly?

Elsie made no promise, and the unhappy young nobleman rode off, and, perhaps unwisely, began a system of correspondence, if such it could be called; for the letters which arrived every day were not responded to by Elsie.

Once, and once only, she wrote to him a few words, to save a scene with her father.

How could so shy a plant as love prosper amid such constraining influences, overshadowed by fear?

While each fresh sight of Elsie had increased Lord Brookfield's ardent attachment to the fair girl, she shrunk still more from him. Oh, that he would leave her alone!

She was happy in herself, with her mother, with her brothers and sisters, and her girlish occupations. To go away from them, to leave all her surroundings, and attach herself to this stranger, was in no way attractive to her.

Three weeks went by in this way, constant letters arriving from Lord Brookfield, almost every one of them causing fresh persecution from Elsie's father.

And then, one day, at the end of a month of this continual worry, as Elsie was crossing the lawn alone, Lord Brookfield had reappeared, when she had least expected to see him.

He was much agitated, and on his way to the railway-station.

His mother, who had lain on what had seemed her death-bed for nearly a month, had rallied, he said, and he had ventured to leave her for twenty-four hours; but hardly had he arrived at Brookfield when he was again recalled by telegram.

He had but a few moments to spare before the train started; but could not go away without a brief sight of her he loved so well.

Would she now look favorably on his suit? There was nothing, absolutely nothing, he would not do to win her.

Might he carry away with him the inexpressible consolation that she would not finally reject him? His riches were of no value to him now unless she would consent to share them. Might he then hope that she would at last say the word which would confer on him supreme happiness?

He held her hand; he implored with all the fervor of which he was capable that she would listen to his prayer.

Elsie, who had the constraining certainty that her father was watching this interview from his window, and would lie in wait to attack her on her return to the house—wearied, frightened—thinking of sparing her poor mother fresh scenes, saying to herself

what did it matter?—she could bear it, she supposed—Elsine, in haste and desperation, faltered out that she would not deceive him; she could not control her affection; he was such a recent acquaintance, she could not yet love him; but if—if—if he still wished—

He would not give her time to finish the sentence. He fell upon his knees to thank her.

Oh, she should learn to love him; he would so surround her with devoted tenderness and care!

He asked, expected no more than her consent to allow him to give all his affection to her.

And then he tore himself from the sight of her who had so enraptured him, and Elsine found herself engaged to be the bride of Lord Brookfield.

"I have ended it, mother. I have said, 'Yes;' so there will be no more storms, I hope!" said Elsine, meeting Lady Fairdown as she entered the house.

"What do you mean, my child?" asked her mother.

Elsine, with a hopeless look, told her mother what had passed. Then followed that burst of hysterical weeping, from which Lady Fairdown had not recovered when she entered her husband's library to impart to him the tidings that her daughter had engaged herself to Lord Brookfield.

Elsine was right. The stormy scenes she had so dreaded ceased; but something she shrunk from quite as much took their place—the inevitable fact, which forced itself upon her at every hour of the day, that she had irrevocably bound herself by a promise, and was no longer free.

Twenty-four hours after that hasty engagement Lord Brookfield wrote several long, close pages—all concerning his devotion to his adored Elsine; and he also wrote to her father to express his rapture, and his hopes that Elsine, since she had consented to be his, would not prolong the time of their engagement. He asked this—he ventured to hope it—because his dear mother might lie in her present state for many months. She called for him continually, so that he could not long be absent from her; but he had communicated to her his new and blissful prospects, and she joined her entreaties to his own that his dear Elsine would consent to a speedy bridal, as then they need not be parted by the sad condition of his mother, who would have the supreme consolation of learning to know and love his bride before being taken from them.

And then the lover went on to detail briefly his instructions already given to his lawyers concerning the settlements—a short paragraph, but an eminently satisfactory one to Sir Bertram Fairdown.

Lord Brookfield was acting so very liberally

that, in Sir Bertram's opinion, it augured very well for his own success in borrowing that odd thousand in the future.

Would Elsine consent to a speedy bridal? Of course she should! Had he not talked her into the engagement? The wedding must be managed in the same way.

The poor girl had no time for rest or reflection, Lord Brookfield's letters arrived so fast, as did likewise his costly presents. He sent her a magnificent set of diamond ornaments, came himself expressly to bring her the engaged ring, and to have the felicity of placing it on her finger.

On this occasion he stayed at Sir Bertram's to dine and sleep, but had to leave next morning. He had, however, used his short time well—Elsine had consented to fix the wedding-day six weeks from that date.

In truth, the poor girl was wearied out and desperate. She had been persecuted into saying "Yes!" and now where was the use in deferring what she could not prevent?

"I suppose I shall not be more unhappy than other people, mamma!" she said, dejectedly, when her mother regarded her with an anxious look of affection.

And Elsine tried to cheat herself into the belief that she would have a sort of happiness in marrying so grandly, for she had now no power to draw back. The settlements were in rapid progress, the wedding outfit was ordered; presents were pouring in; congratulations were offered on all sides. How could she draw back from the engagement?

In truth, she would very gladly have done so, but dared not. Her father would have been furious; and she had learned to dread his anger.

Alas that she should have seen her young lover only through the mist of her own fears and misjudging! Had she appealed to him at first to leave her at peace—since that was the only way to save her from misery,—he would have gone away at once.

True, he would have besought her again some day in the future; but would have taken care to do so in such a way that her father should not know of his repeated appeal, in order that she might be free from persecution.

As it was, he believed Sir Bertram to be one of the fondest of fathers. He dreamed not of the pressure to which Elsine had been subjected, nor that Elsine herself looked on *him* as only seeking to coerce her will.

The betrothed young couple met but three times during the six weeks of their engagement, and then Elsine was cold and timid, while Lord Brookfield displayed an almost feverish anxiety to please her.

The young girl felt chained and bound—dragged on against her will.

But she had much to attend to, and grudged

each instant spent apart from her mother and her little sisters, whom she was so soon to leave.

At the commencement of each week she grew more and more restless, and miserable.

"*Could* she go on to the end?" she asked herself. And the answer always seemed the same: "*You must—you must!*"

She barely looked at the host of presents which were offered for her acceptance, and her father had more than once sharply reproved her for her unthankfulness.

Old Lady Brookfield, Lord Brookfield's mother, still lay in the same state of helpless illness, so that the bride and bridegroom elect were not to leave England for the honeymoon, but were to stay a few days only at one of his lordship's country houses, within a few miles of Lady Brookfield's residence, so that, should the poor lady grow worse, her son could be summoned.

Thus matters stood as the time approached for the wedding.

That wedding, so dreaded by Elsie, was very near now. The breakfast was ordered; the wedding-dress had been sent from town; some of the numerous guests asked to grace the ceremony had already arrived at Thornley, Sir Bertram's country place.

For this was Tuesday, and the wedding was to be celebrated on the following Thursday.

CHAPTER II.

THE ESCAPE.

Yes, the day was very near at hand—the fateful day! Elsie had been painfully restless and disturbed, but had suddenly grown calmer, for the first time on this eventful Tuesday had shown some interest in her bridal finery.

Poor Lady Fairdown felt quite cheered when her dear child herself proposed to try on the wedding garments, remarking, with a languid smile, that it would not do to appear ill-dressed on her bridal-day, with the whole county looking on.

And when the dress was tried on, Elsie had found fault with it. A fold in the lace must be altered; it was awkward, and would be noticed.

Again her mother felt cheered. If Elsie could notice so trivial a matter, it was a sign she was roused from her dull hopelessness and despondency. Oh, that she might yet see her child able to return Lord Brookfield's undoubted affection! For then, truly, she would rejoice in her daughter's accession to wealth and high estate.

"My darling, I think—I hope that you are more reconciled to this marriage!" whispered her mother, embracing her, as Elsie stood robed in her bridal attire on the Tuesday,

when the maid had left the room on some errand.

"I do not feel so hopeless certainly, dearest mother!" rejoined Elsie, turning from her mother's gaze.

"Then you are surely happier, darling?" besought Lady Fairdown.

"Yes, mamma dear, because I am calmer; and I am calmer because I can now look straight forward at my lot. I have faced the future; before that, I felt racked with doubt."

"And now you do longer doubt, my own Elsie?"

"Now I have faced the future!" repeated Elsie, in the same way.

It was not a very comforting reply, and poor Lady Fairdown felt very unhappy.

"You will learn to love him, my child!" faltered she.

"No, mother dear, I shall not! I do not deceive myself, and he cannot expect it. But people do not marry for love nowadays, I believe. You did not, did you, mamma?"

"I, my child? Oh, yes, I did! I was so happy! Thought I should have everything my own way! But it is well not to expect too much in married life. Lord Brookfield is really very nice, and a very good-tempered young man, and certainly devoted to you, so you have many chances of happiness!"

"Yes, dear mother! Now let us get ready for our journey to town. And to-day we will not talk about Lord Brookfield, for to-day will be our last alone for a long while!"

In saying these words, Elsie's voice faltered, and Lady Fairdown could not trust herself to reply.

To-day the mother and daughter were to go to London to purchase a few small things which Elsie had not ordered when she gave directions for her outfit. These could be got better and at less expense for ready money, she said.

Sir Bertram had willingly given his daughter twenty-five pounds to expend as she wished, and on this errand Lady Fairdown accompanied her child to London.

Elsie appeared to be quite in spirits.

They went from shop to shop, but she bought mere trifles.

"After all, dear mother," she remarked, at the close of their expedition, "I think I shall not need anything more. Well, we have had a nice day together! But I am very tired. And we are to have so many people to dinner to-night, and Lord Brookfield will be with us so early to-morrow. Dear mother, couldn't I let Martin dress me while you are all dining? If I appear immediately after dinner will not that do? Then I could lie down for a quiet hour, and get rid of this headache—or, better

still, sit in the air quietly, without talking, by myself. I will ask Martin to bring me a cup of coffee when you go to dinner, and will tell her to come to dress me punctually at a quarter to nine. That will give me a full hour's rest."

"Do so, darling, if you like; but have some chicken. Martin shall bring you something when you have your coffee. She can take the tray to the conservatory."

"Thank you, dear mamma," responded Elsie.

Thus, then, when the numerous party assembled below, Elsie was not among them.

Sir Bertram *would* go himself to see how she was, and found her sitting tranquilly just outside the conservatory.

It was a beautiful evening, and a delicious breeze was playing among the greenery overhead and faintly stirring the leaves of the rose-bushes.

Elsie smiled at her father as he approached.

"Can't you come in and have some dinner with us all, my dear?" began he, in a serious tone. "Our visitors will think it so strange for *you* not to be among them—you, above all people!"

"They must do without me just one hour, papa. Martin is to bring me some coffee and cold chicken immediately you all sit down to dinner, and I have told her to be ready to dress me punctually at a quarter to nine. There is such a large party to-night, the ladies can hardly leave the dining-room earlier than a few minutes past nine, as you do not sit down till eight."

Sir Bertram looked at her scrutinizingly, for he had a suspicion that she was really ill.

Her voice was not quite firm, and her fingers trembled.

He was a man always bent on carrying out his own will, even at the expense of other people's—a hard man, who crushed others' feelings in order to have his own way. But he possessed some natural affection, and a slight wave of compunction flew to his heart as he regarded his pale and suffering child.

"But things have gone too far to be altered now. Besides, she doesn't know what is good for her, and I do!"

With which hasty reflection he bent and kissed her fair brow; only saying, "Very well, my dear. Mind you eat something, or you will not get rid of your headache."

"Yes, thank you, papa!" said Elsie.

He was turning from her, when he came back a step.

"Will you have a glass of champagne, my dear?"

"No, thank you, papa. Coffee will be best; and here comes Martin with it."

Those we have heard were the last words

spoken between father and daughter for many a day.

Sir Bertram walked away to entertain his guests, and Martin approached her young mistress.

"Will you have it outside in the air, miss?" asked she, bringing the tray forward.

"Thank you, Martin. I don't think I can eat just yet, so put the tray inside on the small table. But I will take the coffee now. Don't be later than ten minutes to nine in going to my room. I think I may have till then, and that is not giving myself a full hour's rest, for it is striking eight o'clock now."

"I'm sure you may have till nine if you like, miss," returned Martin; "for I'll put everything ready, and you don't need to do much to your hair to-night."

"Very well. Then at five minutes to nine, please, Martin."

"Yes, miss," returned the good-natured maid, carrying the tray inside the conservatory as directed.

When she was gone Elsie grew paler than the white flowers which were blossoming near her. She sat quite still, murmuring to herself, "I have ventured all upon this one hour!"

She leaned back and closed her eyes, and so sat motionless a little space. Then she took out the tiny watch at her side, her fingers trembling so much that she could barely accomplish the slight task.

"If I am seen?" she gasped. "My life's destiny depends on the next half-hour!"

She bowed her head between her hands, murmuring still to herself.

"In ten minutes!" escaped her pale lips.

Ten minutes! To Elsie a lifetime of agony was compressed into that time. But she quickly raised her head from the desponding attitude which for one brief moment she had assumed, then glanced around her searchingly. Next she rose, walking into the conservatory, where she set down the coffee cup; and, oh! the piercing look she sent through the flowers to the room beyond, to discover if any one was there.

But no—all was still. There was no one near. All the servants were occupied with the dinner and with the numerous guests. Outside the house there was no one either.

Elsie did not sit down again on the garden seat. With one look at the upper windows of the house, she quitted the spot where Martin had left her, and with swift steps directed her way toward one side of the grounds beyond which the trees of a small coppice reared their heads.

A narrow path led through this place toward the high road, offering a short cut for the inmates of Thornley House to the railway station, a quarter of a mile distant. No one,

however, but members of Sir Bertram's family were allowed to avail themselves of it, and the gate leading to the public road was always locked.

It was along this pathway, toward this gate, that Elsie fled, breathless.

At the gate she paused, not only to unlock it, but, first of all, to withdraw from the sheltering bushes a small bag, hidden there forty-eight hours before. She carried over her arm a dark cloak, which she had placed carelessly on the garden seat. This she hastily put on, together with a close-fitting bonnet, pinned all day, in a crushed condition, beneath the skirt of her dress.

She had traveled to London with it, and had felt that she carried it, as she embraced her mother for the last time after their return from town.

Poor, crushed bonnet! what confidence you had inspired all that anxious day, supporting the trembling heart which trusted to you as a disguise!

A dark veil was attached to it; a widow's cap beneath it. As to her exterior, Elsie looked like a respectable person in black when she issued from the small gate leading into the road that evening.

On she fled, for did she not know that her safety—her freedom—depended upon swiftness? The train—the evening train, which would either take her to London, or to a junction with cross-country lines, would be due in a quarter of an hour—at twenty-five minutes past eight! By the time Martin came to dress her, at five minutes to nine, this train would have set her down either at Minning, or Salby, or Honnishly, quiet villages, in the midst of pretty scenery. She dared not go on to town; her absence must be discovered before nine o'clock, and if not immediately suspected, she could not expect more than a few minutes' grace. By ten o'clock her father would be on her track. He would have her watched till he could follow her; would force her to go back! Elsie shuddered at the thought as she passed on toward the station.

She met no one but a child of about twelve years of age, a little girl whom she had seen at the village school. The child stared, and walked on. She had not recognized Miss Fair-down in her black bonnet, veil, and cloak. Would Elsie be as fortunate at the station?

"A ticket for Salby, second-class," said she, putting down half-a-crown.

The clerk gave the change, and pushed toward her the blue ticket. Elsie took them up, and made for the platform.

What a five minutes those were, when, seated in the railway carriage, she waited for the train to go on! Four or five people got into the same carriage with herself. Would any one of them recognize her through her veil?

At last the train gave a jolt, and moved a little; then the gliding movement grew rapid. She was, so far, saved!

CHAPTER III.

THE RUINS.

SAVED? Well, yes; but in what a manner! At ten minutes to nine she was landed, with the evening twilight deepening around her, at the rural hamlet of Salby, with no present opportunity of escaping beyond its limits. At no house dared she seek a shelter or a morsel of food. What, then, did she propose to do?

The one clear idea in her perturbed young heart was to hide herself; she left the rest to after circumstances. Everything connected with her proposed concealment had been thought of up to a certain point; all other things, grave though they were, had not been taken into consideration. Thus she had not been alarmed by the idea of what she was to do in the future; the escape from the marriage forced upon her, had filled all her thoughts. And now she found herself walking along a country road, darkness coming on, with no definite plans save to seek concealment for the night and the following day.

Where should she seek such concealment? As we have said, she dared ask no human creature for shelter or for food!

There were, about three miles further on, some ruins—a straggling gray pile of crumbling walls, broken archways, and shattered windows, over which weeds and wild flowers grew in picturesque confusion.

Hither, one summer holiday, Elsie had accompanied a gay party from Thornley House, who had picnicked amid these very ruins. In what a different guise she approached them now!

Supported by the intense excitement from which she was suffering, the young girl walked on at a quick pace. Some cattle, feeding peacefully in a field, were the only creatures who saw her pass. Evening shadows crept slowly and softly down on the wide landscape, and threw over the ruins she sought—the Gray Towers they were called—a peculiar gloom, casting a mantle of melancholy and mystery over the picturesque pile.

What black shadows under the broken archways! A bird, flying from the ivy, sent out some tiny stones from the crumbling wall, which pattered down—the sole noise in that vast place—that, and the faint sighs of the night. And Elsie was at this lonely place, a homeless wanderer!

Steal on, kind night, and hide her weary steps! Wrap her in your soft mantle, shelter her in your protecting arms! She should have been firmer, those may say who have never been placed in like circumstances; or, if so,

were gifted with stronger nerves and made of sterner stuff. Do not, then, blame Elsie too severely because she had lacked the courage steadily to refuse compliance to her father's tyrannous will.

Well, here she was now, within the very shadows of the Gray Towers. Treading warily, for the ground was uneven, she traversed the outer court, and got within what was once the long dining-hall. This was partially roofed in, and there were some rude seats, for this deserted hall was a favorite place of resort for picnic parties; and here Elsie sunk down, too weary even to feel fear. She could just discern a rough bench in a corner, and wrapping the cloak around her, crouched out of sight in the shadow and fell to sleep, with the night-wind blowing, sad and melancholy, through the ruins.

In this deep solitude she passed the night hours, but with earliest dawn awoke. Her hard resting-place, the freshness of the early morning—above all, the trouble of her mind, roused her at an unwonted hour. She sat up tremblingly, the many dangers before her thronging to her brain.

Now, for the first time for many hours, she had leisure to think. What was to become of her? How, even, could she get food for that day's needs? She had, indeed, taken the precaution of putting some biscuits into her pocket, which, hungry as she already was, were welcome enough; but she was aware that she could not live for many hours without becoming ill upon a few biscuits only—she who had been accustomed to regular and dainty fare.

She had something less than twenty-five pounds in her pocket, chiefly from what she had received from her father the previous day, to buy various trifles judged necessary for her bridal! The previous day! That seemed removed from her by ages of time. Her bridal! Ah, to-morrow was to have been her wedding-day!

She shuddered as she watched the dawn lighting up faintly the gray walls which encircled her. How lovely it was! How pure the air! But he was stiff and chill, as she essayed to walk and to think connectedly.

And now a shaft of sunlight broke across the sky. The birds were all awake, the old ruins were alive with their tuneful songs. Elsie would have found pleasure in their innocent delight, but for the thoughts that pressed heavily on her—What must not her mother be suffering? What were they all doing at home?

She had not much pity for Lord Brookfield; thought of him only as the man who was the cause of her present distress, and was in league with her father to coerce her to his will. Then suddenly an overwhelming sense of desolation came over her, and she burst into a passion of weeping.

It was now six o'clock. She lingered among the ruins of the Gray Towers till toward half-past nine—to her an interminable age of time—when she judged it would be safe to seek the high road, as at that hour she would appear in the guise of an ordinary traveler. Oh, for a hand-glass that she might put on a wig with which she had provided herself! To do so without the aid of a mirror would be perilous, for some of her own hair might stray out and betray the disguise.

With a sigh of infinite weariness she left the Gray Towers behind her. Not far, indeed, for the sight of every distant person on the road alarmed her, and she turned out of the path to hide behind the hedges. It was slow work getting on thus.

A little group of country folks, talking together by the roadside as she approached the village of Salby, so much terrified her that she turned sharp off in a contrary direction, and met a child hardly six years old carrying a milk can.

"See, little girl," said Elsie, taking out a bright sixpence; "will you let me drink some of your milk? I will give you this new sixpence if you will."

The child turned rosy red with delight, and held out the can, saying awkwardly, as she clutched the silver coin, "Ye can drink it up, 'cos I got it all for a ha'penny."

Revived by the draught, Elsie walked on again, whither she knew not. On—on in the morning sunlight, through dewy pasture lands, where cattle browsed peacefully—down charming sequestered by-paths, till her feet were weary. The sun was hot, too; rest became a necessity. When would she reach some town, far away from Salby, where she might venture to take the train for London. If she could once reach the metropolis, she had then a plan for future subsistence.

So tired out at length that she could walk no further, Elsie took refuge in a wood, where stately fir-trees reared their straight, red-brown trunks in solitary grandeur. The dry ground was thickly strewn with scatterings from the fir boughs; there were no pathways. Surely this place was safe to rest in! But, safe or not, she was compelled to rest; and so sunk down at the foot of a fine tree, against the stem of which she rested her weary head.

And here she dozed away the summer afternoon on the day preceding that which was to have been her wedding-day! She needed food, but she said to herself that she could endure some hours longer. Now and then a squirrel scudded along, unheeding her silent presence, or a bird flew through the branches overhead. She could hear the rumble of wheels pass and repass along the road below, but no other sound of human life reached her. It was two o'clock when she entered the pine-

wood, and it was nearly six when she rose to continue her way; for at length she had fallen into a deep slumber, induced by exhaustion and want of food.

The sleep had given her strength, but she was very hungry. Despite the danger, she must somewhere ask for food. But no habitation was visible save a porter's lodge, at the entrance to some park. She dared not ask there.

And now she went steadily on in the pleasant evening, but was too weak to walk fast.

Several people passed her; they were returning from work, and she took courage (because necessity urged her) to ask of a boy who was trudging along, the way to the nearest village.

"The nearest village be nigh to where I'm goin'," said the boy. "Ye means Salby. Whereabouts do ye come from, then?"

Salby!—the nearest village *Salby!* She had been walking for hours in the morning, and had she not got away from Salby? It was even so. In her distress of mind and ignorance of the country hereabouts, what with the continual twisting and turning, she had actually gone back to within two miles of Salby!

"Where do ye come from?" repeated the boy. Elsie was frightened.

"I came from near Salby," she faltered, "but I'm a bad hand at finding my way, and so I've missed it."

"Well, then, you'd best keep along the high road," answered the boy, "then you won't miss the way agen. Keep along to the right till ye get to the Gray Towers—ye know the ruins, I reckon?"

"Yes," she replied, faintly.

"Well, ye must go right by 'em, and, not quite a mile on, there ye'll find Salby."

And on was trudging the boy.

"Stay, please!" entreated Elsie. "Can I get a cup of tea anywhere? This hot weather has made me so thirsty!"

"Eh, it is hot!" replied the boy. "Shouldn't I jest like a cup, that's all! There's a public I could take ye to, a matter o' a couple of a dozen yards below the lodge, and, ef you like—"

"Oh, thank you! Then you can have a cup with me; I'll pay for both," returned Elsie eagerly.

The boy grinned. He was hot and tired, and thought he had done a good stroke of business.

As for Elsie, hunger had made her desperate.

Never in her whole life had she set foot in a roadside inn, and this place to which the boy conducted her was a mere public-house of the most primitive description. A bench outside, and within a sanded floor to the small parlor; no private rooms here. But to such a pass had this high-born young lady come, that she entered the rude shelter gratefully. Arriving with this boy, who seemed to know the coun-

try, she trusted would screen her from detection, if news of her flight had traveled thus far.

Happily, at this hour of the evening, the usual loiterers had not yet congregated, or Elsie would have shrunk from entering.

A rough-looking servant-girl met them as they entered, staring stolidly at Elsie. The latter, in great fear, motioned to her companion to speak. She need, not however, have been so scared. This girl could neither read nor write, and it was her habit to stare at everything and everybody.

"What do you want, eh?" asked this damsel, as the boy only grinned at her without saying anything.

"We wants tea, I reckon," replied he, suddenly finding his tongue. Then Elsie, taking courage added, "Yes, can we have tea?"

Tea? Yes; they could have tea. Would they have a rasher of bacon?

"Elsie at once said, "Yes," in answer to this question, and also asked for eggs.

Her companion grinned from ear to ear with delight. He was amazed at his own good fortune. Bacon and eggs with his tea were as great delicacies to him—perhaps far greater—than whitebait and champagne are to many people.

The simple feast was spread at the end of a quarter of an hour, and was even more welcome to the delicate Elsie than to the hungry boy. Never had any tea tasted so delicious or any egg been so welcome.

She revived as she ate, and began to question her companion, cautiously and fearfully.

Did he work hereabouts? Yes; for Squire Marsden, who lived up at the big house, a quarter of a mile from this. Which was the nearest town to Salby? There were two towns a matter of five miles away from Salby. There was Fleete, and there was Grayston. Which did she mean, now?

Answering entirely at random, she said she meant the one where the railway station was.

"Oh! then that's Fleete," replied the boy, accepting the last slice of bacon left in the dish, and beginning to munch anew.

Elsie's thoughts were busy with wild ideas of reaching Fleete this very night. *Dared* she hire some cart to carry her there—and could she thus get on to London under cover of the darkness? But this hope faded speedily away. It would be so late when she arrived in town, where could she obtain a lodging? To go to a hotel at midnight, and alone, would never do. And probably, when she got to Fleete, the last train for London would have started. No; she must remain one more night in the country, that was clear. Where could she stay, then—here?

"Do you think I could remain here to-night?" was her next query.

"They don't let no beds, 'cos they hasn't got 'em to let," grinned the boy. "My eye! how white your hands be! *You* don't do no hard work for *your* livin', I guess! Be you a lady, then?"

"A lady?" cried Elsie. "I am quite poor now. I must work for my living, I assure you."

"I don't mean no offense," replied the boy, startled at her manner.

But this remark had disturbed her thoughts, and she was anxious to get away from him.

"Will you go and ask for the bill for what we have had?" said she.

And as he went into the bar for this purpose, she hastily cut off a slice of bread and butter for to-morrow's needs, and secreted it ere he returned.

Five minutes after, she was journeying along the road again with her companion.

"I shall have to turn off into the fields directly," remarked he; "but we may as well go together as far as the next turn of the road. I say, you're not bad off to be able to pay for a nice tea like that. Why, 'twas well nigh three shillings as you paid!"

"That was for once in a way. I've never done it before," said Elsie.

"Well, I'm much obliged to ye. Good-night!" said the boy.

"Good-night!" returned Elsie.

And then she found herself alone again, with evening coming on.

Where should she go? Where *could* she go, save to the ruins? Yet she trembled far more at the idea of spending the hours of darkness amid their gloom again than she had done last night. *Then* everything seemed possible to her, if she might only escape; *now* the keenness of the excitement which had upheld her was passing away, and she had more room for fears to assail her.

But she was still too alarmed at the possibility of being discovered to dare to ask for shelter in Salby. To-morrow early, at seven o'clock, she would set out for Fleete. She would ask her way, and would go on to London. Once in town, she would be safe. Oh, that to-morrow had already dawned!

Many fears assailed her as she went along the quiet highway—the coming night, and a great dread lest at the roadside inn she should have been suspected to be Miss Fairdown.

Two men (who had arrived there while she and the boy were having tea in the sanded parlor) had, as she thought, regarded her scrutinizingly as she went out. They were sitting on the bench outside the house, drinking beer, and were wild-looking fellows. One of them had a peculiar voice, deep and sonorous. It attracted the notice of Elsie. What if they followed her? She glanced back continually,

but no such forms did she see. Quietly the evening crept on; night stole around her as gently as it before had done.

Here, too, were the Gray Towers. They had sheltered her last night; why should not this pass for her in safety? But, oh! how silent the old place was!—how deeply gloomy!

The girl sickened with dread as she stole in among the old walls, crumbling so rapidly to decay. It was fully half-past eight o'clock as she gained the deserted dining-hall.

A picnic party must have feasted here to-day, for there were evidences of a temporary occupation. Crusts of bread; baskets which had contained strawberries, a battered meat-tin, were just distinguishable in the dim light.

Elsie crept into a corner. Soon fatigue overcame her, and she slept though uneasily.

Her mind was somewhat at rest. She had eluded pursuit so far, and had determined her plans for to-morrow.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE NIGHT.

DESPITE her strange surroundings, Elsie had slumbered for three or four hours, when suddenly she was aroused, and recalled to a sense of her desolate position.

The silence of midnight was disturbed, the soft summer air broken, by the sound of a human voice.

A human voice! How alarming to this lonely girl, entirely alone in these old ruins, with the darkness and gloom as her only protectors!

Hush! A second voice answered the first gruffly, with uncultured accent and rough words. Whoever they were who spoke they must be very near her.

"I say, Bill, you and me has had many a narrer shave, but never a one jest so much touch-and-go as the last!"

"No; 'twas a near go, an' no mistake!"

"'Tis so confounded dark!" said the first speaker.

"The dark has stood us in place of a good pal to-night!" was the response.

"Dark or light, what's to be done?" asked the man who had first spoken.

He must have been a rough, to judge by his brutal voice. Elsie shuddered, and was very still.

"Done? Why, we must bury 'em!"

"Where's the chance, when you never brought no matches? 'Tis as dark as pitch in this old place!"

"We must get rid of 'em, anyhow!" said the man who had neglected to bring the matches.

"If we're to bury 'em safe out o' sight, we'll have to stay here till dawn!"

It would not be possible to describe the fears

of Elsie, which were increased by the words of the invisible speakers.

"We ought to be miles enuf away afore then; but we must, fust of all, put these here out o'sight."

"Let's take 'em with us, says I."

"An' keep 'em as a witness agen us? Why, the beaks wouldn't want no other to prove how as we broke into my Lord Brookfield's fine house last night. You're a clever one, you are, to go and think o' sich a plan!"

"And you ain't no better, to go blustering about it in that 'ere tone! Who's to know that there isn't some beak a-prowling about 'ere?"

"Oh! 'tis safe enough!" returned the other.

"But I say 'tisn't! How should it be when the p'lice are on the scent, what with all this 'appenin'? What with the young lady a-cuttin' away, an' my lord bein' right down crazed with tryin' to find her, and the old gov'ner arter her an' all, it stan's to reason they're all on the look-out! Why *you* know as well as me that's the reason as we pushed matters on a bit, an' paid our little visit to my lord's while the house was upside down: else we should most certainly ha' waited till arter the weddin'. But when no weddin' was like to come off, twas *strike while the iron's 'ot!*"

"Shut up," growled the other, "an' let's do one thing or t'other! Be we to bury 'em in the dark, or pitch 'em into the pond at t'other side this place, or poke 'em under the stone-heap by the chapel here, an' so come back when 'tis safe, an' advertise as we found 'em, and so git a reward?"

"Poke 'em under the stone heap!" replied a resolute voice.

The notion of getting a reward for his villainy made the man chuckle with merriment.

"That's a prime notion o' yourn—ha, ha!—that is! Well, we didn't git much, so we'd ought to make somethin', by hook or by crook, out o' our wenture. Sal shall do the advertisin' and receive the reward, bless her! and she shall hand it over to us. A woman is so convenient in a small business sich as we carries on!"

"Come on, then!" replied the other rogue. "Mind the stones!"

"Ha! ha! I should think so! And Sal's a good 'un. But we must git this hid safe, else we sha'n't get no reward, nor nothin'!"

"Confound you for forgettin' the matches! Can ye find yer way to the stone heap?"

"To be sure! I wish everything else was as easy. I'd manage that blindfold!"

Unspeakable relief! Elsie heard them stumbling away; and soon was alone again with the soft, deep gloom, with the silence of the night.

Alone! Yes; but what a revelation had

been made to her out of the silence! The police had been communicated with to assist in searching for her. Lord Brookfield was aiding her father, doubtless in that search; he was distracted, the men had said. For the first time, Elsie asked herself whether it was with rage or with regret. But she speedily decided that his anger must equal her father's, and desire to hide herself from him forever took still more complete possession of her.

This absorbing feeling was succeeded by another—a dread lest the men should return to the shattered dining-hall, and delay their departure till dawn. If so, what fate must await her? They would never leave her alive to tell the story of their evil doings so incautiously revealed!

Had they buried the mysterious *something* under the stone heap by the ruined chapel? If so—if the wretched men did *not* return, oh, then, she must see what that *something* was ere she went on her way. That would be a duty!

Then another question forced itself upon her. If she did find whatever it was these men were about to conceal, what to do with it?

She could not retain it in her possession. It would be far from right that she should do that.

How fearful was the next hour! The slow, passing moments!—the strained listening for what was to come! But nothing came. Nothing else disturbed the calm of the summer night.

Far away, two o'clock struck upon her ear; then long after (how long it seemed!) three o'clock; and soon then a pale dawn crept over the darkened landscape.

Next came a rustling in the grass, as if inanimate creation waked also to life at the sun's return; then birds twittered, there was a movement in the air, and sunlight, the first streak of sunlight, broke over the ruined archways.

Elsie burst into a passion of grateful tears. Strength and hope came back to her with the assured absence of the two men, and the welcome daylight.

She stood up, tottering, and, for safety's sake, crept noiselessly behind some huge slabs of stone resting against the wall in the ruined court, and there awaited till five o'clock should strike. By that time she had decided with herself what to do; she would search the stone heap, and then go on to London at any risk.

Softly, almost inarticulately, the sound she was waiting for floated to her ears at length over the dewy grass and morning air, faintly, because a lark was singing so loudly in the blue above.

Then, without a pause, Elsie stole round the ruined court in and out among the broken walls, till she reached the crumbling chapel.

The morning sunlight streamed over it, giving the deserted spot radiance and beauty. And there, too, was the stone heap, beside which a small white sheet of paper was visible.

With a wild, searching glance around, the girl hastened to pick it up, and experienced a strange thrill of feeling at finding that the handwriting was that of Lord Brookfield, her late betrothed, and that she held in her hand a letter (written by him scarce a month since) to a widowed sister of his:—

"DEAREST ADELAIDE,—

"I am truly grieved that you are still detained at the Abbey by Charlie's illness. Do not think I cannot feel for your anxiety as well as my own, though I know that if you could be here with our mother I could be somewhat more with my adored Elsie. Oh Adelaide, if that could be, I think my love for her would teach her to like me, if only just a little!"

"What am I about?" gasped Elsie, crushing the letter in her hand. "I had not meant to read words intended for another!"

She thrust the little sheet of paper into her pocket, and went agitatedly to work upon the stone heap, with that little sentence ringing still in her mind. Poor young Lord Brookfield! she had not loved him, nor did she love him; one regretful sentence would not create fondness in her heart; but she now felt that perchance she might have judged him very hardly.

There was, however, no time now for consideration—no time for glances backward into the past; the future, with its immediate claims, was what she had to meet.

Fortunately for her feeble strength, the men had not taken the trouble to displace many stones, and soon, thrust carelessly out of sight, a bundle of papers rewarded her search.

A moment's glance told her that they were deeds—important papers, doubtless. As far as her hasty look informed her, they seemed to be—yes, they were title deeds! Here were the words written on one sheet—"Title deed, &c." It was evident that the papers had been disarranged from their original order, doubtless by the men who had stolen them, and the few lines which had sent a regretful feeling into Elsie's heart must have fallen from this packet in the darkness.

"I shall have to send them back to him," was the swift thought which darted into her mind.

"But how?" was the question which succeeded it. How? By post, and anonymously? No; that did not seem right to Elsie. The papers must go by post; but she must inform his lordship of where they had been found, that he might better trace the thieves, who (it was possible) had also taken other things in their midnight raid. Nothing could be done, however, till she herself was in safety, and safety (in Elsie's opinion) lay for her in the great city—London.

Trembling, moved, but still infinitely thankful that she had avoided the marriage she had dreaded, Elsie turned her back on the Gray Towers on this fair Thursday, which was to have been her wedding morning.

She went on toward the small town called Fleete, where, as the boy had told her overnight, there was a railway station.

Her feet were very tired long ere she had traveled five miles, for she was feeble from much excitement, from want of a morning meal, and lack of repose of mind and body. Oh! for a cup of coffee! something to give her a passing strength!

The sun was hot, and she had her small bag to carry, and to wear the long, dark cloak, though it impeded her movements, and weighed her down. On the way she passed a roadside inn, but dared not ask for a cup of tea or milk, after what she had overheard in the night. And so, very faint now, she pressed on till the small town of Fleete came into view.

It was nearly nine o'clock; Elsie had her veil down as she walked quietly into the waiting-room, which was empty. And there, with trembling fingers, she hastily adjusted the wig she had with her, and tied on her bonnet and widow's cap over it.

Then she went to the wicket and laid down half a sovereign. "Second single to London."

"Train won't be in for twenty minutes, ma'am," was the answer she received.

Elsie retired into the empty waiting-room and sat down. Through the open door, joyful sight! she caught a glimpse of a poor counter, at which refreshments, so called, were sold to famished travelers, for surely they must be famishing who partook of such fare. But to Elsie the wretched coffee, watered with thin, cold milk, was life. The meager beverage restored some strength to the famished girl, and ten minutes later she was speeding away from Fleete toward that city where she confidently believed safety, employment, and peace awaited her.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT AUTUMN BROUGHT.

It was full summer when Elsie fled from her home, and from the brilliant future offered for her acceptance. At the time when we resume our tale, September had rolled away half its mellow, pleasant days.

On one genial evening in this month of earliest autumn, a party of gentlemen sat over their wine and dessert in a pretty country house, not far from Sir Bertram Fairdown's mansion. There had been a small, merry dinner party, the ladies had just retired, and one of the gentlemen had been relating some ghost story connected with a house long unlet in the neighborhood.

"Talking of strange disappearances, and to leave the subject of the supernatural entirely aside," said the host (a Mr. Frenchly, and a neighbor and acquaintance of Sir Bertram's), "no disappearance could have been more sudden or complete than that of a young lady we most of us knew—the beautiful Miss Fairdown. She has vanished as completely from her old home as if she had been a ghost. What a strange, sad affair this is, to be sure!"

"What is that you are speaking of, Frenchly? Won't you relate it for my benefit?" asked one of the party, who was an old friend of Mr. Frenchly's, but who had been long abroad, and had but just returned to England.

"Certainly, you shall hear it," responded the host. "A neighbor of ours, Sir Bertram Fairdown, has a very lovely daughter, only last year introduced into society. Well, about a dozen miles off there is a very fine property called Brookfield, the owner of which is a young nobleman, an extremely nice young fellow, very handsome and wealthy. He fell desperately in love with Miss Fairdown at first sight, and wanted to marry her. It seems that she was talked or forced into accepting him (for he was a great catch, and her father is a very severe man), but that she was honest enough to tell Lord Brookfield that she did not love him. However, he was grateful to her for accepting him on any conditions, and the marriage was hurried on because of the illness of Lord Brookfield's mother.

"All was arranged, settlements signed, the wedding breakfast ordered, the wedding dress (and some of the guests) in the house. This was on the Tuesday. Thursday was the day fixed for the ceremony.

"On that same Tuesday (I shall never forget it, for my wife and I were dining at Sir Bertram's that evening),—on that Tuesday Miss Fairdown excused herself from joining the dinner party, as she had been to town with her mother, and complained of fatigue. She wished to sit in the air while dinner was going on, she said, adding that her maid should bring her some coffee, and was to come to dress her punctually about nine o'clock.

"Well, the maid took the coffee to the garden, Miss Fairdown enjoined her to be particular about coming to dress her at nine o'clock, as she was to join the circle in the drawing-room after dinner, and from that time to this she has disappeared entirely and completely. She fled, to avoid the marriage with Lord Brookfield."

"And has she never been heard of since?" inquired the friend, with interest.

"Yes; heard of, but never traced," returned Mr. Frenchly; "and the manner in which she was heard of increases the romance of the disappearance. I must explain that Miss Fair-

down's father, Sir Bertram, was *furious*, Lady Fairdown in tortures of anxiety, the whole household in the direst consternation, as indeed was natural. But it is impossible to describe the blow to the bridegroom expectant, for he was, and is, devoted to the young lady. Poor fellow! it went hard with him—bitterly hard. He has never recovered it, and never will, I suppose. But listen to what happened, for a more romantic incident we do not meet with in story-books.

"Young Lord Brookfield was, as I have said, crushed, despairing! He set every engine to work to find his lost love, but with the sole idea of restoring her to friends and happiness, blaming himself unceasingly for having hurried on the marriage. Too late he saw things in their real light; that the young lady had not had time to learn to respond to his affection—that he had been a stranger to her almost, and that her father had coerced her into a consent to marry him. At first he gave himself no rest night or day in his efforts to discover her, thereby endearing himself to the afflicted Lady Fairdown, who had hitherto looked coldly on his suit, knowing that her daughter did not return his love. But when all the poor young nobleman's efforts came to nothing, after the first few days he broke down altogether, refused food, could neither rest nor sleep, and it was feared an attack of brain fever would set in, when something as romantic as unexpected roused him to new efforts, and so saved him from utter wretchedness.

"One morning he received (by post) a letter from the girl he had loved and lost, something to this effect. I can almost repeat its contents, for it was shown to me by Sir Bertram some time afterward.

"It ran in this wise:—

"MY LORD—

"It has become my duty to make you acquainted with the fact that certain title deeds belonging to you, and also a letter addressed to your sister, Lady Serly, were stolen from your house at Brookfield by some men, and hidden by them the night following under a heap of stones by the ruined chapel of the Gray Towers. These papers I restore to your lordship, as I was hidden in the old dining hall of the ruins, and overheard the discussion between the thieves.

"I trust they will safely reach your lordship's hands. Let me add that I now deplore my own want of courage in not frankly and firmly refusing the honor you offered me. Forgive me; and, if you can forget an injury, let my dear mother know that I am safe and well. 'ELSINE FAIRDOWN.'"

"What a romantic proceeding!" cried the listener. "But had Miss Fairdown actually the courage to hide herself in the ruins?"

"She must have done so. And very great danger she must have run. Evidently while her family and her despairing lover were searching for her miles away, she was but a short dis-

tance from them, concealed in some ghostly ruins, where she must have passed at least one night, and where she overheard some robbers talking of their exploit of the evening before, when they had made an attempt to ransack the house of the young nobleman who had wished to marry her. When daylight returned, she must have possessed herself of the papers, and determined that it was her duty to communicate with the owner."

"Where were the papers posted? There must have been a post-mark," cried Mr. Frenchly's friend.

"There was. They had been posted in a small village only a few miles from the Gray Towers. The letter Miss Fairdown rescued with the title deeds must have touched her, despite her want of affection for Lord Brookfield—that is, if she read it; for it was addressed by his lordship to his sister. It deplored the latter's forced detention by the sick-bed of her little son, as her presence would release Brookfield now and then from his mother's sick-room, and give him opportunity of seeing more of his intended, for whom his love was so great that he cherished the hope that if he could be more with her, he would be able to rouse some faint response to his devotion. From that time to this, nearly three months ago, there has been no tidings of his fair betrothed. Even Sir Bertram, who at first vowed that he would never forgive his daughter—never allow her to enter his house again, would now feel extremely relieved if he could find her."

"But do they do nothing to discover the young lady? Had she any money with her?" asked the gentleman to whom this story was related.

"She had about five-and-twenty pounds, it is supposed," replied Mr. Frenchly; "no more. Sir Bertram and Lord Brookfield have advertised in different papers, and offered rewards, but nothing can be heard of her. Poor young Lord Brookfield, whom I feel for deeply, is going abroad for a year, at least; not from any hope of finding forgetfulness, but in the belief that his absence may induce Miss Fairdown to communicate with her family."

"Dear me, what a romantic tale! No ghost story could be half so exciting as these plain facts—at least, to me. I suppose it will always be found that truth is stranger than fiction."

"Yes; so it always is. Did you remark a large, imposing-looking pile as you drove here from the station yesterday? That is Lord Brookfield's place. I should much like you to have met the owner; but he no longer goes into society, and to-morrow is to start on a distant voyage. He goes first, I believe, to Tartary, to remain there in some outlandish solitude, quite removed from any town, for a month or so, and then is to travel in the East somewhere.

I have even heard that he meditates a protracted sojourn in India."

"It is a pity he cannot see Miss Fairdown by some contrivance. She might be moved to pity."

"Yes; but they cannot meet now. He is going to lands remote for an indefinite period, and she remains in concealment. Besides, they could hardly make up a match after what had occurred."

"And what of old Lady Brookfield, the young lord's mother?"

"She is much better, but still a sort of invalid. She, too, is to winter abroad in Algeria; but has a daughter with her. Poor Lord Brookfield is in no state now to be with his mother, night and day. He is a man on the verge of despair, and it is fortunate that her ladyship is so much recovered. Her son's heavy grief seems to have roused her. Previously to this she refused to leave England, and could not bear him out of her sight."

"What a pity it seems that Miss Fairdown could not love him!" exclaimed Mr. Frenchly's guests, in chorus.

"It seems so, certainly," answered the host; "but had she done so, I would not have had to interrupt the recital concerning the haunted house in this neighborhood with my romantic story of true love unrequited. Come, shall we join the ladies?"

Still commenting on their friend's narration, the assembled party rose to bend their way to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER CONSEQUENCES.

THERE is, in a quiet street leading from a fashionable thoroughfare, the very select establishment of a milliner and dressmaker, where a certain well-dressed Parisian, Madame Laraye, supplies customers who have well-filled purses with faultless hats, mantles, French flowers, and other very desirable articles.

It was in Madame Laraye's large, handsome show-room that a slim, very young-looking widow sat busied apart in a corner on the afternoon of that very September day when Mr. Frenchly and his guests had discoursed on Elsie's flight from home, and from her noble betrothed.

She had not long been employed in Madame Laraye's establishment; but the Frenchwoman, pleased with the appearance of the young widow, and finding that she asked no payment for her services, for the first six months, and that she had much taste in arranging flowers, had taken her for three months on trial.

"Mrs. Grove, will you attend to this lady, if you please?" said Madame Laraye to the youthful widow.

A tall, elegantly-attired person had just entered at that moment when Madame Laraye herself was listening to minute orders from the Duchess of Greenleaf.

Mrs. Grove laid down the wreath she was making up, and came quickly and quietly forward. Her face underwent a strange change, from passive calm to deep disturbance, strongly repressed, as she obeyed Madame Laraye's request.

The lady who was waiting to be attended to apparently observed nothing of her emotion, remarking carelessly, "I want a traveling hat. Will you show me some that are light, and not too much trimmed?"

Mrs. Grove hastened to bring the hats, and the lady selected one, after a little hesitation.

"Let me see; I forget the price of this one, which I first tried on. Did you say three guineas?"

"Yes, madam," replied the young widow.

"Not more? Oh, then, I think I will take that hat as well as the black beaver. I am going abroad for the winter, and may find it useful. Put this up for me also, if you please. Put them down to my account, and let me have my bill for this half-year within the next fortnight, as I wish to settle it before leaving England."

"Yes, madam," again answered Mrs. Grove. "To whom shall I ask Madame Laraye to send the account?"

"To Lady Serly. I thought all Madame Laraye's people knew me. I am an old customer of hers. You are a new hand, I suppose?" (While asking this carelessly, her ladyship was absorbed in regarding a bunch of French flowers on a table near her.) "Those lovely things!" she remarked, barely listening to Mrs. Grove's answer.

"I have only been here two or three months, madam."

"Well, send my hats to-night to Grosvenor Gardens. I think I have all I want now; but I can manage to drive this way again if my maid thinks I need another mantle. Stay; I might as well look at some now. I want a light one; not very warm. Something lined with silk."

Mrs. Grove went into another room to fetch the articles required; and, as she passed a large mirror, cast a frightened look at her own reflection.

"Can she recognize me? Oh, no; it is not possible. She has only seen me once, and then—"

"Ah, then it was under such different circumstances—in the midst of such different surroundings, that Madame Laraye's workwoman might be justified in believing that lady Serly would not connect her with—with whom? With Elsie Fairdown! who had been but too thankful to accept her present position, only

too grateful to obtain the chance of a safe shelter as a hand in Madame Laraye's establishment.

She had thus carried out her plan of getting employment at a milliner's as a maker-up of flowers or tasteful bouquets, but had been glad to obtain a shelter without remuneration to begin with.

Once, and once only, during her short season "out," had Elsie met Lord Brookfield's widowed sister, Lady Serly, and that was at that very ball where the young nobleman had fallen so desperately in love with her.

On that occasion he had said to her, after their second dance, "You must let me introduce you to my sister." And Lady Serly, observing her brother look very animated, as he said, "Adelaide, let me introduce you to Miss Fairdown," had smiled, and extended her jewelled hand cordially.

And now they met again, in Madame Laraye's show-room! What a marvelous change in her life Elsie had undergone since that ball night! She was only a workwoman now—one of *the hands*—with the chance of dismissal before her, if she failed to give her employer satisfaction. But she had chosen her own lot, as far as she could choose it, still its hardships and utter loneliness were very hard to bear for her who had been so tenderly nurtured.

A strange life it was, truly, for one who had been the destined bride of a peer!

The moment after her introduction to Lord Brookfield's sister Elsie had been claimed by her partner for the ensuing valse, and thus the interview between Lady Serly and Elsie had been of the shortest.

But the latter well remembered her ladyship. How painful for the young girl should Lady Serly remember her as well! Still, that was very unlikely. Lord Brookfield's sister was a striking-looking person. She was richly dressed, as became her rank; while Elsie was so disguised by her wig, her widow's cap, and change of dress, that she was not recognizable by any but a close observer.

Yet she trembled with agitation as she returned with the mantles to Lady Serly.

That lady was making an inspection of some head-dresses, and was not aware of Elsie's approach till the latter said, deferentially, "I have brought some mantles such as your ladyship desired."

"Thank you. I will look at them in a moment. What is the price of this head-dress?" continued her ladyship.

"Allow me to ask, madame," replied Elsie, consulting one of the other "young ladies."

"Thirty-five shillings," said she, returning.

"Oh, that's very reasonable for the sort of thing. Put that up for me with the hats. Now let me look at the mantles."

Elsie displayed them one after the other;

but her emotion was so great that she grew confused about the prices and stammered more than once in her replies.

Lady Serly, however, seemed more bent on obtaining a fashionable article which pleased her than in securing something at a low price. She had been easily pleased about the hats; but was most difficult to suit concerning the mantles. Either the shape, trimming, or lining did not accord with her wishes.

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble," said she, with slight hauteur; "but I am obliged to be particular about a mantle, as I shall be away from England for so long a time, and don't at all know whether I shall be in a place where I can buy another should I need one. My maid who is now with me may leave me, which would be a great trial."

"I shall be glad to fetch other mantles for your ladyship to see; it is no trouble," replied Elsie. "Or I will take your orders, and have one made according to your directions."

"But I want to find one ready-made," said Lady Serly. "Surely you have a mantle that would fit me, with trimming and something like this one, and as light. I must explain that it is to wear in Algiers in the winter. It is a great inconvenience to me to be so long absent, but I cannot let my invalid mother go alone, as she has no one else to be with her, now that my brother"—her ladyship sighed—"is so out of health. He is just starting for the East, and we shall not see him for a full year."

Her ladyship had dropped the mantle which just before she had regarded with such interest, while a sad expression crossed her face. But she soon returned to the business in hand, saying, briskly, "Well, as it is for Algiers I want the mantle, you understand, it must not be too warm."

"No, madam."

Elsie could barely pronounce the simple words. Lord Brookfield, out of health, going abroad for a year! Was she the cause—she who stood here, in guise of a workwoman, offering articles for sale to his sister? Truly it was a hard task she had to perform to conceal her agitation.

Pity, regret, emotion, struggled in her heart; but these feelings could not create love.

Her present life was very hard, however; ungenial, with no time for reading, or doing pleasant things; with no refining influences about her, no companions of like culture with herself. If she had done wrong in flying from the bridegroom she had not learned to love, she paid for it bitterly every moment of her life; but still she was thankful to have escaped that forced bridal. Only she was sorry that Lord Brookfield suffered through her.

"After all, I believe you will have to make one for me," said Lady Serly, pushing the

rejected articles on one side. "Will you take the necessary measurement?"

"I will send some one to do so, madam, as I am not one of the mantle hands."

"Oh, very well. Stay a moment, if you please. Will you say that I must have the mantle sent home by Thursday in next week, as I am only waiting in town till the courier I have engaged is free to travel with me and my mother?"

"Yes, my lady."

Elsie withdrew, and, having executed Lady Serly's commission, retired to her occupation of arranging the wreath she had been busy with when interrupted to attend to her ladyship. But how shaken with trouble and emotion! Her heart, stirred to its depths with longings after her mother, her old, dear home life, became suddenly filled with intense desire to escape from her present surroundings.

But she could not do that at the cost of daring her father's deep anger—of, perhaps, being forced, after all, to marry Lord Brookfield. She remembered how bent her father had been on making her accept him—how passionately he had desired that she should become Lady Brookfield.

With all these reflections careering through her brain, was it wonderful that the wreath in her hands suffered?

To add to her confusion, Lady Serly suddenly approached her.

"It was you who attended to me just now? Yes, of course, I remember that it was. What was the price of that last mantle I looked at—the black silk trimmed with jet and fringe?"

"Ten—no, twelve guineas, I believe, my lady. Allow me to ascertain correctly," stammered Elsie.

"Do, if you please; but I will also order a mantle to be made, as I am particular respecting the fit."

"Yes, madam. The forewoman is waiting to attend to your ladyship, and will be able to give you the price of every article."

"Oh, very well! then I need not trouble you any more?"

Lady Serly swept back again to the other room, but not before the wreath in Elsie's hands was sadly twisted.

"What are you about, Mrs. Grove?" asked Madame Laraye, sharply. "If you can not do better than that, our engagement will soon come to an end."

Madame spoke in so loud a tone that Lady Serly, who was still occupied giving directions concerning the mantle she wished made for her, heard what was said.

Madame, being a hasty temper, continued,—"The wreath is spoiled! What is running in your mind to make you commit such a blun-

der! Oh, don't tell me you're sorry! Being sorry will not mend matters. I'm afraid you won't do for my establishment, Mrs. Grove; so I should recommend you to look out at once for some light place, for the three months' trial we agreed on is just coming to an end."

"Oh, madame!" murmured Elsie, now speaking in an entreating tone, and addressing the angry Frenchwoman in her own language, in order that all the other people in the room might not understand too much of what was said. "Oh, madame, do not be hard on me for this one fault! I will serve another six weeks without salary when my six months shall have expired! I am so entirely without friends in London!"

"I can't help your having no friends in London," responded madame, but in a slightly mollified tone. "What I want is a sharp hand in the business—one that will improve. Now, it's no use deceiving you, Mrs. Grove; you're not fit for business. You're more in the way of making a superior maid in a good family. Why don't you learn the dressmaking, and have a few lessons in hair-dressing; and I don't doubt I could recommend you?"

Here was a blow to Elsie. To earn her living in a milliner's rooms was possible to her; to earn her living as a maid to some lady seemed impossible.

To be brought into contact with John, the footman, to dine in the housekeeper's room, startled Miss Fairdown.

"Well, haven't you a word of thanks to say for my offer?" said madame, resuming her sharpness of tone. "Let me tell you that you won't get a better recommendation than mine easily. But, since you think light of it, do as you best can for yourself. But you'll just understand that have you in the business I can't, and won't; so this is my notice to you!"

"Pray, pray, madame," entreated Elsie, in French—how pathetic was her voice!—"pray give me another trial! I will pay every attention. I should not do for a lady's maid!"

"Oh, yes, you would. You're just one to suit a particular lady; and you can speak French, and are quiet-mannered. It's the only thing I can do for you to mention you to some of my customers; and if you're wise, you'll take the chance, for you're *not* one that'll suit in the business!"

In her extreme distress, Elsie could only remain speechless, and try to check any expression of her dismay. But the room seemed to whirl round with her, and she was incapable of reply.

"Excuse me," said a voice close to her, suddenly interrupting the little scene, and addressing Madame Laraye herself, "but if this young person is leaving you, and desires to find a

quiet place as maid, I believe I can offer her such a situation. The fact is, my own maid dislikes going abroad for so long; and then, again, she does not speak French. Now, this young woman addressed you in excellent French just now; so, if we can come to terms, I will engage her."

Elsie was petrified. Here was Lady Serly offering her a situation.

Strange reversal of fortune! Having refused to become the sister of this wealthy woman, Fate now stepped in to offer Elsie the post of her maid.

Unable to reply, her head giddy with excited and painful feeling, she could only glance timidly to Lady Serly: then look imploringly at Madame Laraye.

Of course, it would be far too dangerous to accept this unlooked-for position, as some time or other Lord Brookfield would assuredly come to see his sister; otherwise—despairing as she was, without a home, her poor twenty-five pounds come so nearly to an end—Elsie would have accepted the post.

Madame Laraye was as much alarmed, and in as much consternation, in her way, as Elsie herself. She had had no idea that one of her customers could overhear her scolding tones, as she believed that Lady Serly had left the shop.

With a flushed countenance, madame now stammered out an apology for having reproofed one of her young people before her ladyship; but she had not known her ladyship was still in the room, or she would have attended herself to her ladyship.

"I have been ordering a mantle," said Lady Serly; "and, perhaps, it was to my own benefit that I overheard this difficulty, as I want a quiet person, who can speak French, to go abroad with me for a year. Whoever I engage will really have no trouble, as my mother will take a very capable maid with her, and the courier we have engaged is a particularly respectable, dependable man. I and my family have known him for years, and he is scarcely like a servant. Then, as to time, it seems to me that I shall be leaving England exactly about the day that this young person is to leave you, Madame Laraye. We shall only wait till my brother is fairly off to the East, and then we shall start."

"You are very kind, indeed, my lady, to offer me this situation," stammered Elsie, "but I am afraid that I should be still more awkward as a maid than as a hand here. I should not suit you. I cannot dress a lady, nor arrange hair well, nor make a dress."

"But I suppose you could learn to do the small things I should want? I do not need a person to make dresses, and my mother's maid will do my hair. What I want is a quiet, re-

spectable person who can read to me when I am tired, make an excursion with me when my mother finds it too fatiguing, speak French when I want a message taken, and write a letter. Now, you can do all these things, I venture to say?"

"Yes, my lady," faltered Elsie; "but—but I think I should do better to try to teach. I could teach children some things."

"But have you had any experience in teaching? You will find that ladies will be very particular about references. What references have you? Of course, I should think Madame Laraye's recommendation quite sufficient in engaging a maid; but you must be aware that more is expected when one engages a governess for one's children. May I ask if you have taught before?"

"No, my lady," replied Elsie, almost inaudibly.

"Very well, then; that would be much against you. And I suppose you do not expect to start otherwise than as a *nursery* governess? Have you been accustomed to wash and dress children—to walk out with them, and attend to their wardrobes? All that would be required of you in such a post as you wish to fill."

Poor Elsie! her thoughts flew back to a certain governess with whom she had once been brought into contact—a young person who had accompanied some children to pay a visit at Thornley House. What a life they led her?

Elsie knew well that she would be far less able to fulfill the duties of nursery governess than of traveling companion to Lord Brookfield's sister.

And what references had she to offer? She dared give none. Madame Laraye had been content to take her without references. Lord Brookfield was away from England, or would be before Lady Serly went to Algiers. He was not to travel with them. Would it not be better to accept this most unexpected offer? Even if her late betrothed did ever encounter her, he would hardly recognize her. It was plain that his sister had not the remotest idea of her real position.

"Perhaps you imagine," continued Lady Serly, "that you will earn a higher salary as a nursery governess than as companion to me. But there, again, I believe you are deceived. What salary do you ask?"

"Oh, your ladyship is altogether too kind!" exclaimed Madame Laraye.

"You see, I think we might find it a mutual convenience," remarked Lady Serly, turning to madame, with a smile.

"Who did your ladyship say would travel with you?" stammered Elsie.

"My mother, her old maid, and our courier—no one else," replied Lady Serly; "and I have already explained pretty much what your

duties would be. Of course, I do not wish to over-persuade you, but I cannot help repeating that I think you would act wisely in accepting my situation. At any rate, if you disliked my service, you would be free to leave it. Suppose you try?"

What else could she do?—with so little money left, with no recommendation, nowhere to turn? But truly the Fates had played her a strange trick, to send her to Lord Brookfield's sister!

"My lady, I accept your kind offer, and hope I shall please you," said Elsie, in a low voice.

"I am sure you will," answered Lady Serly, cheerfully. "When I come in about the mantle next week—I am to have it fitted—we can fix when you are to join me. I cannot decide the exact day we shall leave England till my brother has started." (Here Lady Serly suppressed another sigh). "Your name is—what?" asked she, turning to Elsie.

"Grove," replied the girl, in a still lower tone than before.

"You are very young to be a widow. I presume you have no children?"

"No, my lady," said Elsie, her face flushing painfully.

"I thought not, by seeing you employed here. Well, I shall be able to name the day of your joining me on Thursday."

And her ladyship walked away, and entering her carriage, drove off, leaving Elsie in a state of utter bewilderment. She was engaged to fill the post of traveling-maid to Lady Serly—to Lord Brookfield's own sister—to that very sister Adelaide to whom *he* had written those words concerning herself which had touched her so keenly. Oh, what memories of that time when she had hidden herself in the Gray Towers crowded into her brain! How had she borne it, that time and the days which preceded it? How should she bear the days which would follow?

CHAPTER VII.

THE COURIER.

THE days had run their even round; next week had come and gone; the mantle (the indirect cause of her present position and future prospects) had been tried on and sent home. Elsie had had another short interview with Lady Serly, and it had been arranged that she should join her ladyship the day before the one fixed for leaving England.

"My brother will have said his good-by to us all by that time; I have so felt, so dreaded his departure, that I could not arrange small matters—not even your joining me—till that was over," her ladyship had remarked.

And Elsie had thought, "He will be gone! I shall be secure from recognition. Before Lady Serly returns to England, I must leave

her, for in this country Lord Brookfield might possibly pierce through my disguise, since *here* he would have occasional opportunities of encountering me."

Suppose, for instance, Lady Serly desired her maid, Grove, to accompany her to Brookfield; at any chance moment some accident might reveal to *him* what had escaped his sister's notice. Ah! she must never run this dreadful, painful risk, but quit Lady Serly's service on again reaching London.

And now the much-thought-of hour had arrived when Elsie was to play an entirely new part in life, that of maid to a great lady—she, who had from earliest youth had a maid herself. Here she was, on her way in the cab; here she was at the house which contained her future mistress.

Elsie's heart sunk very low as she got out on the pavement and rung at the servants' entrance. To her surprise, she met with a cheery reception; for a kind-looking woman, somewhat past middle age, was waiting in the hall to receive her.

"I am the housekeeper," said this pleasant-looking personage. "Her ladyship told me to be on the look-out for you. We're just going to tea in the housekeeper's room, so let me show you the way."

Elsie thanked her, in a faltering voice. She dreaded her first introduction to her new life among servants. But she need have had no fear. The housekeeper showed her to a pleasant room, in which were all the comforts to which she had been accustomed, a large bath, a wardrobe, and an easy-chair being among the number.

Elsie knew that in her father's house the servants were not so well cared for, and she made the remark, with inward gratitude, "that it was very comfortable."

"Her ladyship likes us all to be as comfortable as she is herself—I will say that for her. It's a good family from which my lady comes," said the housekeeper, with some pride.

Elsie wondered if the young nobleman from whom she had fled was as much to be liked as his sister; but her heart was too full of the immediate present to dwell on that just now.

"Who will have tea with us?" asked she, timidly.

"There's only me and her ladyship's own maid, you, Mrs. Grove, and the courier as always travels with her ladyship. You won't need to mind him; he's a very quiet man—no one more so—and highly respectable. Her ladyship always takes him abroad with her."

A little reassured, Elsie followed the kind housekeeper (Mrs. Stone) down-stairs.

They entered a large room, in which tea was spread for four people. Elsie felt a pass-

ing surprise to see cold chicken and fruit on the table.

The courier was standing by the fire-place when they came into the room, and looked up and bowed without speaking. Elsie had not expected to see so young a man, or one who looked so unlike a foreigner, though he had a good deal of dark bushy beard, and roughened hair of the same color. She noticed that he had, besides, the deepest air of melancholy on his countenance that she had ever remarked in any one with whom she had come in contact, and her first sight of him awakened a feeling of pity.

She returned his salute in silence, and took her seat at the tea-table.

"Mrs. Grove, I dare say you have been packing and busy to-day, and 'hav'n't had much time for dinner; so eat a bit of chicken now. One should eat well before a long journey," said the housekeeper.

"Let me help you to some," said the courier, addressing Elsie in a deep voice, and speaking in excellent English.

"Thank you," she replied, looking at him more attentively—for something in his tone arrested her attention.

"May I give you a slice of chicken, Mrs. Stone?" asked the courier, after having helped Elsie to the most delicate morsel.

"No, thank you, sir, for I made a good dinner and supper. I forgot to tell you, Mrs. Grove, that supper is toward half-past eight."

"Thank you," again returned Elsie, involuntarily cheered by her kind reception, and again venturing a timid look at the courier. Where had she seen him? She could not recall having ever met with him before, and yet something about him appeared to her familiar. She wondered what countryman he was, and why he wore an air of such deep sadness.

During the whole meal he spoke but once again, being apparently absorbed in his own thoughts; but he never failed to be ready to wait on Elsie or on Mrs. Stone, or on her ladyship's old maid, Mrs. Bartry, whenever they wanted anything. Yet his manner was grave and calm, and most unobtrusive.

"I need not mind traveling with him, or with the maid," decided Elsie, mentally. "I wonder what makes him look so sad!"

At this moment a knock came at the door of the housekeeper's room, and a young footman came in with a message.

"Her ladyship wishes to see you, Mrs. Stone, and also Mrs. Bartry, for a few minutes, and she hopes Mrs. Grove has arrived."

"Tell her ladyship that I will be with her immediately," returned Mrs. Stone, rising.

Tea being finished (it was long since Elsie had partaken of so dainty a meal), the small party dispersed. Elsie sat down by the win-

dow, hoping that the courier would leave the room; but he did not. He took up a position carelessly on the hearth-rug, and asked, "Are you a good traveler, Mrs. Grove?"

"Yes, I enjoy traveling," answered she.

"Do you know Algiers? Her ladyship has engaged me to stay there with her for the winter and the spring."

"Algiers will be new to me," answered El-sine; "And I am glad to go there. Are you acquainted with the country?"

"A little. I have been there once—some years since."

"And is it an interesting place? Are you glad to revisit it?"

"I must answer your questions in order. Algiers, both the town and country, are to me very interesting. As to being glad to revisit it, I can only tell you that all places are at present alike to me. I no longer rejoice at anything."

"I am very sorry," faltered El-sine. "I am afraid my careless question has recalled some misfortune."

"Do not blame yourself," said he, gently, "for the misfortune which has darkened all my life is always present to me—always!"

"I hope it may be removed," murmured El-sine, distressed.

"That is hardly possible," he said, gravely, approaching the window by which she sat. "But I do not wish to complain—I ought not to expect to be exempt from sorrow, for that is the common lot. And let me apologize to you for burdening so recent an acquaintance with even a hint of my own troubles. It is unpardonable of me to have done so; but we are to travel together, which I trust will form some slight excuse; added to which it is such a temptation to open one's griefs, when one meets with a person raised by culture above such people as good, kind Mrs. Stone, or Mrs. Bartry. For without any assurance of the fact, I can see that you have lived among quite another class than the one to which they belong. Your speech and manner at once betrayed so much."

"But I have now to earn my own bread," returned El-sine, quickly, and much embarrassed. "Indeed, I accounted myself very fortunate in being offered the post of traveling-maid to Lady Serly."

"And I," rejoined the courier, "accounted myself fortunate when her ladyship engaged me for the ensuing winter and spring; but such a piece of good fortune does not remove the sorrow of a life-long grief, however thankful one may be to obtain employment."

He sighed as he concluded, and El-sine made no rejoinder. She already felt interested in him, and would have liked to know what heart-sorrow hung about him. Presently he spoke again.

"You, too, must have known trouble; your dress, added to your youthfulness, betray that. Ah, it is sad to stand at the entrance of life, where Joy once stretched out her hands to us, and suddenly to find those hands withdrawn from us forever!"

Once more El-sine ventured no reply, and the courier walked back to the empty fire-place. She was embarrassed—wished to find a comforting word to say; but how was that possible for her, who did not even know the cause of his sorrow? It was he who again broke the silence.

"You must let me again entreat your pardon for this thrusting of my own personal grief upon your notice. What can I do to win your forgiveness? I will promise that, after to-night, you shall not hear a hint of my troubles; then I may hope, may I not, both to win your pardon, and make you lose the dread of having a complaining fellow-traveler?"

"But—but, pray," stammered El-sine, "do speak of your griefs if it is a relief; I am not so selfish as to wish or to expect that nothing but pleasant things shall be spoken before me."

"You are too kind," murmured the courier; "but indeed I will not repay your kindness by continual indulgence of the utterance of my grief. No; but as I have said so much, I suppose it is just as well that I should say one word more, by way of explanation. The cause of my sorrow is told in few words."

He crossed the room as he spoke, and standing beside her, said, mournfully, and in a broken voice, "I have lost her whom I loved with my whole soul!"

Having said which, he turned abruptly, and walked straight out of the room.

El-sine sighed softly when thus left to herself, and looked after the courier's retreating figure. She felt more interest in him than ever

CHAPTER VIII.

ELSINE'S DEBUT IN SERVITUDE.

"EXCUSE me, Mrs. Grove; I'd no thought of leaving you all to yourself the first day of your coming here," said Mrs. Stone, bustling back again; "but her ladyship has so much to arrange before going abroad for so long. Mrs. Bartry is dressing her now, and then she'll want to see you before she goes down to dinner."

"You'll tell me when to go, and show me the way, please?" said El-sine, feeling all her timidity return at this forthcoming interview with her new mistress.

"Certainly I will. Sit down, Mrs. Grove, and we'll have candles, for it's a'most dark, I declare; and we can have a chat till her ladyship rings. Mr. Maurice Bewley, is a nice man, isn't he?"

"Is he—the courier?" asked El-sine.

"Dear, yes! I forgot I'd never told you his

name. I feel so sorry for him, young as he is to look so melancholy! You must have noticed he has some trouble?" said the housekeeper.

"He does look sad," answered Elsine. "Do you know what makes him so?"

"I couldn't give particulars," returned Mrs. Stone; "but I know it's some trouble about losing the girl he was to have married. He's quite a superior person, don't you think so? And a prime favorite with her ladyship, I can tell you!"

Elsine became so absorbed in reflection on the past, that she could barely preserve the appearance of attention to what the housekeeper went on to say.

For Elsine was asking herself whether, by any possibility, Lord Brookfield had suffered (and through *her*) a tithe of what this Mr. Bewley was enduring. She felt heart-stricken at the thought; but it had not been her fault that she could not return the love forced upon her. And then, again, the courier had spoken as if death had taken him from the object of his affection. "I have lost her whom I loved with my whole soul!" Did not that mean that she had died? It became of intense interest to her to discover whether this was the right interpretation of his words.

"Mrs. Stone," said she, "how did Mr. Bewley lose the—the young lady he was engaged to marry? Did she die?"

"No, Mrs. Grove, she jilted him—I know that much. And it's broke his heart, fine, manly fellow that he is!" replied the housekeeper.

Elsine felt still more sad than before she had asked the question.

"But what was the reason? Didn't she love him, Mrs. Stone? If she did not, it might not have been any fault of hers, you know," pleaded Elsine.

"No, my dear miss—(excuse me for calling you so, but you are so young, I declare I forget you've been married)—but it *was* her fault, for promising to marry him. There's where I blame her. You see, she'd raised his hopes, and he'd made sure of her, and then she threw him over. Some of 'em, they as loves deep, never recover the blow.

Elsine felt very unhappy.

"There is her ladyship's bell," said the housekeeper, suddenly. "Come with me, and whatever you want to unpack you can do after supper, which will be early to-night."

Elsine followed Mrs. Stone up a broad staircase, and through a handsome ante-room to a tasteful boudoir, in which Lady Serly was seated, giving directions to the courier.

"Then we are to leave by the night-train at half-past eight in the evening, Bewley?" she heard her remark, on entering. "Very well; I leave all to you."

"I think your ladyship will find it convenient to go by that train," answered the courier.

"That will be all, then, Bewley."

"Yes, my lady!" said he, retiring.

Then Lady Serly turned to Elsine.

"Well," she said, "I hope you left Madame Laraye comfortably? She has a hot temper, but she spoke very highly of you, so you see she has a kind heart."

"Yes, my lady; we parted on very good terms," replied Elsine, standing respectfully at a little distance from her ladyship.

She was beginning to be expert in her assumed character.

"Now about luggage. I dare say you know how to put up what you require for the journey in a small space? We shall stay several nights on the way, as my mother, lady Brookfield, is far from strong."

"I shall only want one small bag, my lady."

"That will do. Your trunks will go with my luggage. Try to get a long sleep to-night, for we are to cross the water to-morrow evening. Ask my maid for anything you want; you will always find her ready to oblige you. She is an excellent person, and knows that I like those about me to be comfortable. And Bewley is an excellent man, too," continued Lady Serly. "I esteem his character very highly, and trust him thoroughly. Good-night! I am going down to dinner now, and let me advise you to go early to bed, and to do what packing you need for the journey in the morning."

"I am very much obliged to your ladyship!"

The dreaded interview was over, and Elsine drew a breath of relief as she closed the door on retiring.

Outside, in the corridor, the courier awaited her.

"I lingered to show you the way below," said he. "You are not yet used to the turns and corners of the house."

"Thank you very much!" said Elsine, with a furtive glance at his handsome, melancholy face.

She longed to ask, as together they descended the long stairway, "Did the girl you loved make you believe that she returned your affection, or did she leave you after she had promised to be yours?"

But we are not permitted to ask such plain questions as we journey through life; and Elsine was silent.

As they reached the long flight of stairs leading to the offices below, Elsine missed a stair, slipped, and would have experienced an ugly fall but for the quick grasp of the courier.

"Are you hurt?" cried he, agitated and distressed. "How could I have been so careless as to lead you this way?"

Elsine was surprised at his concern. He was quite roused from his deep melancholy—startled from his calm—at her accident.

"Thanks to you, my awkwardness has had no painful result!" answered she, releasing her hands from his clasp.

"I should not have brought you this way," repeated he. "Do not run the risk of slipping again; come back, and we can pass through the dining-room."

"Oh, no! Lady Serly will be coming down stairs. Besides, I must accustom myself to all the nooks and corners of my new abode."

"If you will go this way, then, allow me to make sure you run no more risks!"

And he took firm hold of her hand.

Elsine felt that his own hand trembled!

What meant such agitation? Had he been so shaken by the shock to his happiness that a slight incident like this unnerved him?

On re-entering the room below, Elsine found that the young footman, who had brought Mrs. Stone the message from Lady Serly, was engaged in laying the cloth for supper.

"Mrs. Stone, seated at a small side-table, was trying in vain to thread her needle.

Elsine approached, and offered her aid.

"Thank you kindly!" said the housekeeper, accepting the help. "We're to have supper a bit earlier to-night because of the journey to-morrow."

When the said supper made its appearance, Elsine could not repress a passing mental query as to the manner in which Lady Serly's own table was served, if her servants were so well cared for. White soup, fish, *entrees*, and wine made their appearance, Mr. Bewley waiting on Elsine with quiet, unobtrusive attention. He anticipated her least want, but all the time seemed engaged in what was going on around him.

Soon after supper, Elsine rose to retire, early as it still was. But she did not wish to sleep; her heart was full of home and its memories; and she intended to write a long letter to her mother, assuring her that all was well with her daughter, and to post it herself before starting on her long journey to-morrow evening.

Mr. Bewley rose quickly when Elsine signified her intention to retire, and lighting her candlestick, presented it deferentially.

"Good night!" said he, not venturing to offer his hand.

But something of timid deference in his manner, of sadness in his look and tone, and of pity for that sadness on Elsine's part, made her extend hers.

He bowed over it. A sudden radiance lighted his face, then died away, and was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

IN ALGIERS.

THEY had journeyed far, but by easy stages, and had now been some weeks settled in Algiers.

New skies, new surroundings, the comfort and peace of her present life, gave back to Elsine something of her former joyousness and youthful brightness. There were times when she forgot that she was only Lady Serly's maid, such kind consideration, such easy duties fell to her lot in this pleasant country in which she had come to sojourn.

In former days, during her brief engagement to Lord Brookfield, she had heard a passing hint of old Lady Brookfield's exacting temper, so that she had somewhat dreaded any contact with her, even in the character of Lady Serly's maid; but she was greatly surprised to find the old lady kindness itself whenever she addressed her daughter's domestics.

And was there no other element in her daily life which threw a charm over it for Elsine? Truly the skies were blue, and the Mediterranean lay like a dream of loveliness beneath the glowing color; while graceful palm trees waved their tall crowned heads; and forms, clad in picturesque garbs, in accordance with the Eastern scenery, moved hither and thither before Elsine's delighted eyes; but all this new, uncommon life moving about her, with its charm and freshness, all the kindness she received from her employer, could not account for the new tide of joy which had flown in upon her heart.

Was there not something else which had stolen into it, pervading it with new and pleasurable emotion? Yes, yes; Elsine at length confessed as much to herself, as she sat at her window one morning, gazing out into the distance.

Long had she struggled with the conviction; but at length she confessed to herself that Maurice Bewley, the courier, had become inexpressibly dear to her.

And what did she know of him? Nothing, save that he was a trusted servant of Lady Serly's, and that at every point of his personal intercourse with herself she experienced from him the most delicate kindness. But of his family she knew nothing. She saw that he was cultured; that he had the manners of a well-bred gentleman, acquired, doubtless, by travel and much intercourse with those well-born, aided by a naturally refined and courteous disposition.

But Elsine's admiration for him could not blot out the fact that he held the position of a servant—a trusted and much respected one, doubtless—a high grade of servant, but still gaining his living *in service*.

If she married him, she must be contented to be forever separated from her family.

"If she married him!" Had it come to such a question as that? She was not even sure that he loved her. He had never allowed his tongue to say so; and yet she felt his devotion in her innermost being. She knew she was the glory of his life, the delight of every breath he drew, though he had refrained his tongue from telling her so. Was it that he felt himself in no position to support a wife in comfort? Elsie believed that this it was which compelled him to silence.

Would there come a day (ere they had to part, perchance) when love would break down this restraint, and he would confess to her the secret he was so vainly endeavoring to conceal?

If so, how should she answer him? Was she ready to leave all for his sake—all the past, with its dear associations; and, joining her lot to his, sink down to his level in life, and shake hands with poverty? Would it be hard to her to do this? Hard! Nothing would be hard to her which blessed her with *his* love, and with *his* constant presence! So high, or so low (for opinions will differ), had become this young lady's thoughts and ideas.

Yet love itself could not blind her to those hard things which she must undergo if she became the wife of a mere courier. Her young sisters, now on the verge of entering society, her brothers, two of whom were in the army—how would they feel when they heard that their sister, rejecting Lord Brookfield, had married a servant? Her dear mother, too, could not but deplore it; and as for her father, she knew he would never receive her again.

These reflections made her sigh very bitterly, though she had the exquisite hope that Maurice—it was by this appellation she designated the courier in her heart—that Maurice loved her.

Many and many a time she had longed to ask Lady Serly whether she had favorable news of her brother, but that she dared not do; so she would furtively watch her ladyship, and strive to gather from her demeanor, when letters arrived, whether she had received unwelcome tidings.

But Elsie could gather nothing; only sometimes she fancied that she detected an expression of anxiety on Lady Serly's face. One day, as Mrs. Bartry and herself sat together alone, she had ventured an inquiry about Lord Brookfield.

"Has her ladyship good news from her brother, Mrs. Bartry? She was once so anxious about him."

"I don't justly know as it's to be called *good* news, my dear Mrs. Grove; but her ladyship seems still doubtful whether his lordship will consent to go back to England when she does.

She certainly now and again seems to have hopes of it, and then seems greatly cheered."

"Where is his lordship now, Mrs. Bartry?"

"Somewhere in foreign parts, my dear. I can't tell you where."

"Do you know when her ladyship intends to return to England?" continued Elsie, with a great pang at her heart, for returning to England meant severance from Maurice, or renouncing her own family to all intents and purposes forever; and she had cherished the hope that some day, in the future, when Lord Brookfield was married, she could go home again.

"I don't know nothing for *certain*; but I believe that depends on what news her ladyship gets from Lord Brookfield," answered the maid.

Elsie was silent. But how many voices clamored in her heart! To sit still seemed impossible while tortured with that rush of feeling; and she rose suddenly, saying to the maid, "Do you think I might venture to go out for a little while? If her ladyship should want me, would you answer her bell, Mrs. Bartry?"

"With the greatest pleasure; but you may be sure my lady won't want you at this time. And if she should I could explain that you liked a walk. Nothing would be said."

"That is true. I meet with such wonderful kindness here," rejoined Elsie.

"Not more than others," answered the maid, quickly. "Her ladyship, and *my* lady, too, are kind to everybody."

"Indeed they are." Elsie stood a moment irresolute. She had put on her wide hat, and was drawing on her gloves slowly, when she asked, timidly, "And is Lord Brookfield as kind as—his relatives?"

"He's kindness itself, Mrs. Grove! And so you'll find, if ever you meet his lordship—poor young man!"

Elsie did not prolong the conversation, though she had long lost all fear of detection. She had asked the question only to discover whether she had wronged Lord Brookfield in judging him as she had done, not with any regretful feeling of what she had lost.

To love Maurice Bewley, to be loved by him, and to dare to accept his affection, was all the world to her now.

Slowly she left the house, and sought the outer air, treading softly, not to let Maurice (if he were near) detect her whereabouts; for her mind was so disturbed that, dearly as she loved him, she would be glad to secure complete solitude, in order to regain repose.

It was now the month of February, and in this lovely land of Algeria the roses were in bloom, as also were the almond trees. Spring perfumed the air with its delicious scents, long

ere the winter had loosened his icy hand from English shores.

Lady Serly's villa was situated in the fashionable quarter of the place, on a hillside, amid groves of orange-trees, palms, and cypresses. Luxuriant creepers adorned its white walls. The sky was ablaze with saffron color. An Arab, clothed in his graceful white burnous, was lounging near a couple of negroes, as clumsy as the Arab was elegant; while a little group of turbaned Moors were chatting together under a wide-spread palm.

Elsine soon left them far behind. She walked on until she came to an avenue of acacia-trees, and there she paused. Her hurried walk became calmer; she was away from the town. She was alone—alone with the distant mountains, the blue sea, the aloes, and the cypress foliage.

Here she could think; here she was herself again. She drew a breath of relief, and stood still.

"Let me answer honestly to myself," mused she, remaining motionless under the acacias. "Let me not shrink from what must be met. What shall I answer if—if Maurice asks me for my love? Can I—am I ready to renounce for him all else in the world that is dear to me?"

And the answer came, direct and clear—"I am ready."

"But he may never ask," whispered her heart. "You and he may part soon. Prudence may forbid any avowal of his affection. He may deem it honorable to be silent, whatever it shall cost him. How will you bear that silence—that separation?"

These were not easy questions to answer, and a cold chill thrilled through Elsine.

All at once she heard a footstep behind her, and a voice which covered her fair features with a rosy flush.

Maurice had followed her. He was here close to her side.

CHAPTER X.

TWO LOVERS SO TRUE.

"I SAW you—I made sure that it was you—at a very great distance!" cried he, putting out his hand.

She laid hers in his without speaking, though they had met several times before in the course of the day, and the rose-tint on her cheeks deepened while he held her hand closely.

"Where were you going?" asked he, in softest tones.

"I? Oh, in no particular direction. I came to have a higher view of fairyland!" said she, pointing to the snow-topped distant hills, and to the glittering view of the sea, and striving to speak carelessly, and as if her heart were not throbbing loudly in her breast.

"Where shall we go?" said he, murmuring

still more softly. "How delicious to be here with you!"

She took no heed in words, but turned away, confusedly faltering, "We had better go back now." Then, with sudden recollection, "But is it not the dinner hour? Will not Lady Serly and her mother require you?"

"Not to-night," said he, composedly, and looking straight away over the sea.

She wondered, but asked no further questions, as she turned to walk toward the villa.

"Why should we go back so soon?" said he. "It is a glorious evening! Ah, Elsine!—I have learnt your name, you see—will you permit me to call you Elsine? It is a name I so dearly love!"

"If you will," she murmured. "But—but better not."

"To-night, then, for these few fleeting delicious moments, when rapture is mine as long as I am in your presence!"

Her heart beat faster.

If he spoke more plainly, must she not confess the truth to him?

The necessity of decision between his much-prized love, and renunciation of dear home ties, became too grievous for her.

Thus thinking, she strove to put off the avowal which she saw trembling on his lips.

"If you knew all," she said, moved almost to tears—"if you knew all my past, I am not sure that you would count my—my society so much to be coveted. Perhaps you would judge that I had acted very wrongly. You know so little about me."

"And what do you know of me, Elsine?" asked he, with a smile, while his face was aglow with tenderness, as he again possessed himself of her hand.

"It seems to me that I know a great deal," she answered.

"That is just how I feel about you," said he.

"But have you ever done anything you doubt about?" she asked, with sudden energy and looking inquiringly into his face. "I ought to have had more courage when a difficulty came. I feel that now. And by my want of bravery and firmness I have left my mother a prey to anxiety, and, perhaps, caused much unhappiness to—to some one who once loved me."

"So you think I shall blame you for not having this courage of which you speak?" said he, gazing earnestly at her. "Well, I am not prepared to affirm that I shall not; for you have not yet told me the circumstances. But whether you are to be blamed or not, it has come to this with me, Elsine—that whatever it is, it can never alter the deep devotion I feel for you. Nothing can change that any more, forever. Love for you—you only—fills my whole being. Oh, Elsine! can it be that I may call you *my* Elsine?"

It had come—the avowal she so dreaded, yet so greatly coveted; and in the blissful certainty of his love she forgot everything that savored of unhappiness or fear.

And though she could find no words to respond to his entreaty for the assurance of her affection, he read her answer in the bliss which folded her in its radiance.

There are some moments so full of joy that we can find no words which will in the least express it, and let mighty silence have her sway. So was it now between Maurice and Elsie.

Then, after a lapse of time, how long or short neither of them heeded, Maurice spoke.

"My own Elsie!" he murmured.

And she responded, tremblingly, "Oh, Maurice, you do not know what a useless wife you will have! I—I am not quite what you think me! I have not been brought up to work—to be useful. I am going to tell you the secret of my life."

"Beloved one!" he murmured, holding her fast by him, "I do not ask you to be useful. I ask you only to let me lift every care—every burden from you."

"But you will have to work, Maurice; and so I will learn to labor, too. Do you think I would let you do all for me, while I do nothing? No, no!"

"It is fit that I only should bear the burden!" cried Maurice, enraptured.

"Not so," said she. "But listen, Maurice, and guard my secret carefully, or Lady Serly, kind and good as she is, would think it her duty to tell my father, and we should be separated."

"No one shall separate us!" he cried, warmly.

"Listen, then," she said. "You know that Lord Brookfield is Lady Serly's brother?"

"Of course, darling. I have traveled with Lady Serly for several years in succession."

"Then you have seen Lord Brookfield?"

"I have been abroad with him," answered Maurice, in a low voice, full of emotion.

"Maurice," said Elsie, "I was engaged to be married to Lord Brookfield, and that is why I am here!"

"You?" he cried, huskily.

"Yes! Oh, Maurice, do not despise me when I tell you that I consented to marry him because my father persecuted me till I had said yes, and we had, none of us, any peace! And then—what will you think of me?—I fled from home—fled to escape the marriage two days before the time fixed for the wedding!"

"Do not think that I shall despise you," said Maurice, in a strangely moved voice. "I fear nothing that you can say, save that you should tell me that my present happiness is a dream—that you cannot love me!"

"I can never tell you that, Maurice—never!"

said she, softly. "My love for you has become part of my life."

"Say those words again, my own dear angel!" he entreated, passionately.

Was he, indeed, afraid that she might ever change? Why did he speak with that sharp ring of anxiety in his tone?

"Oh, Maurice," said she, gently, "you surely do not think that I could change so easily? Do I doubt you? Am I beset with fears that you will change? I have always thought that trust was inseparable from love!"

"There is something which makes me fear," he answered.

"Banish it," she replied. "What has fear to do with affection? But," she added, suddenly, raising her head, "you believe, perhaps, that I have soon forgotten some one else? You think that I am a widow? Oh, no! I assumed this dress, this ring, to conceal my identity. I have never been married! My real name is Elsie Fairdown!"

"What! you are the daughter of the proud Baronet, Sir Bertram Fairdown, of Thornley House? And you consent to marry a man who is but a poor courier?"

"Ah, how can I enough rejoice in your love?" she exclaimed, fervently.

Again, for a little space, there was a silence full of bliss between this intensely happy pair of lovers, who counted their mutual love a prize surpassing all else this world has to offer.

"I have had a great trouble once in my life," murmured Maurice; "but it is forgotten—oh, more than forgotten—in this hour!"

His voice was full of thrilling delight, but Elsie felt a chill, for his words recalled to her the fact that once in the past he had loved some other person—loved her so deeply, that she had had power to fill his life with mourning. And the evening when Elsie had first seen him, and the confession he had then made to her, rushed coldly over her heart. Again, she heard him say, "I have lost her whom I loved with my whole soul!"

It was very bitter to her to remember this other love of his so faithfully lamented, while she, Elsie herself, would never have that first adoration which he must have felt for the woman who had deceived, and then lightly forgotten him.

"What is it that saddens you, dearest?" asked Maurice, breaking in on her mournful reverie.

"Do not ask me, Maurice!"

"Are you to grieve alone?" he rejoined.

"Forgive me that I was sad when thinking of that other first love of yours of whom you told me the evening you and I met, Maurice. Can I ever be to you what she was once?"

"Oh, you are right in thinking that she was infinitely, unspeakably dear to me, Elsie; so dear that I thought I could never find happi-

ness again when I lost her. But believe me now when I tell you that, in the future, you fill my whole being—that you are still dearer, Elsie! I lived after her loss; I learned to find happiness in finding you; but you lost to me, I could not bear up against the void which would fill my life. All would be over for me—all—all!”

She was consoled. Yet, under the content that succeeded her deep trouble, lay a sigh of deep regret also. She was not his first love; another would have filled his life had not that other shamefully deceived him. And this infused a drop of real bitterness into Elsie's felicity.

“How shall I thank you, my own Elsie, for your great and generous affection? You are willing, then, to join your lot to that of the poor courier?”

“Willing?” she answered. “Is that a word to use where the treasure of mutual love is concerned?”

“You overwhelm me with your goodness!” he said, tenderly. “Oh, how often have I told myself that this day could never come for me! And now I stand here, and hold your hand in mine, and know that we are affianced!”

“But, Maurice,” she said, softly, after a pause, “I want to tell you a little more. I never made Lord Brookfield believe that I loved him. I have not that wrong to charge myself with. He said that love would come, and all he asked of me was to be his wife.”

“Poor fellow!” answered Maurice.

“He hurried on the wedding day, and I therefore concluded that he was in league with my father to coerce me to marry him; and I saw him so seldom on account of his mother's illness, that I had no chance of losing my preconceived opinion. If I caused him pain, as I fear now that I did—if I judged him hardly, I am truly sorry of it. Of course, he will learn to forget me. People *must* forget when their love is never returned. Don't you think so, Maurice?”

“I do not think that he could ever forget you!” answered Maurice, in a voice of emotion.

“Oh, don't say so, Maurice! Why should you say so? it is hard to say that one is the cause of another's lasting unhappiness.”

“I would not make you unhappy, dearest! But I judge this Lord Brookfield by myself. Knowing that I could never forget you, I do not think he will do so.”

“Maurice,” she said, “you did forget—that other?”

“I shall never forget you!” he repeated, fervently. “To do *that*, I must change into another being!”

Then came over her the firm conviction that she was all in all to him now, however she whom he had loved formerly had once engrossed his heart.

“And that should be enough,” she told herself. “I am unreasonable in asking for more. I cannot ever have the joy of knowing myself his only love. Let me be thankful for the true devotion which is all my own now!”

With this thought she strove to still the lurking regret which *would* rise up again and again; regret that any other should have once possessed that which she so deeply coveted—his first affection.

“I have so much to hear, my darling!” said Maurice, interrupting her thoughts. “What became of you when you fled from home? Who received you? Were you alone?”

Elsie shuddered.

“I dread to think of those days, though they have led me to you,” she answered. “Oh, Maurice, you will never guess what place of concealment I sought. I dared not go to London, as I felt sure my father would telegraph after me, and that I should be stopped on leaving the railway carriage. Nor did I dare to seek shelter from any of the people living in the adjoining villages, as I knew that the news of my flight would travel there immediately, and that I should have but one short hour—only one hour, Maurice—in which to leave home behind me. For I had excused myself from joining the large dinner-party that evening, at my father's, on the plea of fatigue, saying that I would sit in the garden to get the air, and telling my maid to come to dress me punctually at nine o'clock.”

“And in that hour,” said Maurice, with deep interest, “did you escape?”

“Yes; in that hour. It was frightful. I had hidden a small bag, containing a few things, under some bushes in our grounds, and there I shrouded myself in a cloak, and put on a widow's head-dress. In ten minutes I reached the station, and the train set me down near the village of Salby just about the time when my maid would be coming to dress me. It was evening, night was closing around me, but the sense of having avoided the dreaded marriage nerved me to bear all things. Nothing was so dreadful to me as that from which I fled. Maurice, do you know the country about my home? Have you ever been there?”

“Several times,” said he.

She felt his hand tighten on hers, as if with intense emotion.

“Then you know the Gray Towers?”

“Yes, well.”

“It was there that I passed two nights, alone, under the open sky.”

“Oh, my love—my own dear love!”

“I was not afraid the first night—not much, Maurice; but on the next, when I was sitting in the old dining-hall, I was awakened, past midnight, from sleep by voices. Ah! then I had only the darkness for my protector. For these men whom I had heard were midnight

robbers. They had broken into Lord Brookfield's place the night before, and had stolen some title deeds, which they had come there to secrete, and afterward meant to advertise as found, and so obtain a reward."

"You make me tremble at your story, my Elsine!" said Maurice. In truth he seemed strangely moved at the recital of this past danger.

"There is no need to fear now," she said, with a smile. "In the morning I found the papers hidden under some stones by the ruined chapel; and then, Maurice, I walked away from the Gray Towers quite early in the morning, and went on foot to Fleece, where I took the train to London. I had some money with me—twenty-five pounds—and I drove to a quiet hotel, where I engaged a room for a couple of days. There I wrote to my late betrothed, telling him how I had become possessed of the papers belonging to him, and charging him with a message to my mother. Oh, Maurice, if I could have tidings of her!"

"She is well. She hopes for your return, and that supports her. Your flight from home was so much talked of in the neighborhood, and of course in Lady Serly's family, that I could but hear many things concerning it," answered he, in a husky voice.

"Oh, Maurice, you speak confidently; but I have sad doubts about my dear mother! Has Lady Serly ever mentioned her to you?"

"Continually, as was natural. But she would not be likely to mention her to you."

"No. I was a stranger. She would not suppose that I had any interest in such a matter, while you have been year by year so trusted by all the family. And you are sure that my mother is well?"

"Yes. I do know so much for a certainty. Be at ease, dearest Elsine. You shall soon see her, to judge for yourself."

"How will that be possible?" cried she.

"I will manage it. Trust to me, beloved. Only tell me the rest of your story."

"From the hotel I made a short excursion into the country, on purpose to post my letter, and that it might be supposed that I was still not too far from home. That same evening I engaged a lodging, and next day left the hotel. And now I set about finding employment in good earnest, and just when hope itself seemed gone, I was engaged to make up flowers at a fashionable milliner's, who liked my appearance, and said it would tell well for her house. I was to give her all my time for six months, and to receive no payment in money. Do you know that it was there that Lady Serly saw and engaged me? On that small chance hung my future life—my future life and present happiness!"

"And mine!" he echoed, solemnly.

CHAPTER XI.

MAURICE'S CONFESSION.

"I DO not feel inclined to blame you, now that you have told me all, Elsine," said he, as they stood together after her brief recital. "I, too, have something to confess to you. Did you expect that all the confession was to be on your side?"

"I did not think about it, Maurice."

"You set me down as perfection, eh? But I am telling you the simple truth, and tremble when I think of the danger I shall run in avowing all to you. Are you sure that you will be able to forgive me for what I have to say? May I count on your love being as unmoved, as constant as ever? For remember that your love is my life—my very life!"

She looked up and smiled with serene calm, full of happy confidence.

"Yes, I can answer beforehand," said she. "Put me to the venture. Try me; for if I cannot bear testing, I am worth nothing."

"You smile! How confidently you speak, Elsine," answered he; "as if *nothing* could shake your love."

"And nothing could!" she cried. "I do not love to-day, and forget to-morrow. When we two die, Maurice,"—(her voice faltered)—"it will not be a long separation."

"What blessed words!" he murmured, folding her in his arms.

"I am confident because I have grounds for security," she said, a moment later, raising her head from his shoulder. "I feel, I *know*, that I could not love you so entirely if you could be guilty of an unworthy action. Only an action really unworthy could separate us; and of that you could not be guilty."

"What have I done to make you feel this generous trust in me, Elsine?"

"Maurice, have I done anything that you should trust me? But you *do* trust me, nevertheless."

"Fully," he answered, with deep feeling.

"Well, tell me this dreadful secret!" she continued, lightly. "And, Maurice,"—(changing her careless, happy tone to one of anxiety)—"tell me also a little about *her*—she who deceived you. Was she—beautiful?"

"Adorably so!"

She shrunk back a little, dismayed that he still thought of this forgotten love.

"Was the day fixed for your marriage?"

"It was. All was arranged. All seemed absolutely sure when the blow fell. Elsine, I can never tell you what I suffered in those first moments of desolation!"

She shrunk a little further from him, as she asked, "Had she position?—a fortune? Perhaps she was some lady with whom your daily duties threw you into contact? For you have traveled much, Maurice, and lived much with cultured people, I see."

"You are right in thinking that I came into contact with her in the course of my every-day doings. Yes, she was a lady well-born, but not rich; and she consented to marry me, and I placed all my hopes on her."

"Describe her a little, please, Maurice," said Elsie, sadly.

"How can I describe that which is indescribable?" replied he. "Her beauty took a thousand divine charms, fresh graces, as each day rolled on. Can such intangible things be painted in words?"

He spoke with a fervor which alike pained and astonished her.

"Where is she now, Maurice? Is she alive? Do you ever see her?"

"I do see her—sometimes of late."

"And is she happy?"

"I hope so. I sincerely hope so!"

"Is she, then, married?"

"No; she is unmarried."

"Oh, Maurice! has she forgotten *you*?"

"You use the word 'forgotten,' Elsie, but you mistake. She did not love me, though she consented to be my wife."

"And you mean that she has learned to love you since?"

"Heaven grant it!" he ejaculated.

Elsie regarded him with sad astonishment.

"You offer me your love, Maurice, and you can say that! Can it be possible that you desire a mean revenge?"

"No, no!" he cried, in a choked voice.

"Just now," continued Elsie, "you said that you hoped she might be happy. How can you, then, wish that she should love you?"

Athwart his dark face flew a crimson tide; and he held the hands of his betrothed tightly.

"It does seem like a contradiction, dearest; but you will not always think so."

Then, as if he struggled for calmer speech, "Let me make my confession to you. Let me tell you that which I have kept secret—which I even now tremble to speak."

"One moment, Maurice," she faltered, her voice breaking with coming tears. "Forgive me for asking you one more question concerning that lady you once loved! What is her name?"

"Her name, my Elsie! That I will tell you presently, after I have made my confession."

"But why not now?"

"Because, when one has so much at stake, when one feels so much, small things become formidable," he answered.

She sighed.

"Let me say what you will be troubled at, but which I cannot help saying, Maurice; for it would be frightful if you married me, and discovered, too late, that you loved *her* best! Maurice, is there any lingering love for her still in your heart, as the deepest feeling you

possess? If so, it would be less pain to us both to part now and forever."

"But that would kill me!" he cried, passionately.

"Then you will not look back regretfully?"

"Never, if I win you!"

Elsie drew a sigh of intense relief, throwing off in that moment all lingering doubts as to his best affection being really her own at last. She had his assurance, and to doubt now would be treason to him. Back to her came serenity, a child-like peace and confidence, and to her heart deep joy. She smiled with ineffable happiness.

"I can hear *anything* now, Maurice," she said.

He was deeply agitated.

"You rejoice, my darling, because you have the heartfelt adoration of an unknown man!" cried he. "You refused a proud noble, and bless a poor courier with your love."

"I *prefer* the poor courier, Maurice," said she, with a radiant look.

"Will you cling to him, whatever may betide?—will you pardon that which you may blame in him?—will you assure him, before he confesses all to you, that *nothing* shall make you sever your fate from his?"

"I promise, solemnly," she answered, gazing at him with entire trust.

"Yet you fled from Brookfield—you judged him harshly for a less thing; for, Elsie, I have—deceived you!"

"Deceived!" she cried, starting back. But her love was proof against even this.

"I can forgive and forget, too," she added, placing her hand in his.

"You did not forgive Brookfield!"

"I did not *love* him," she murmured, fondly.

There was a short silence between them. The saffron-colored sky had taken a deeper tint, and little golden cloudlets flecked the darker hue of the encircling heavens. A wind, fresh and soft, was playing among the acacia boughs, and in the plain below fields of yellow maize glowed in the dying light.

In such an entrancing hour Maurice made his confession, at length, to the listening ears of her who so truly loved him.

"Elsie," he faltered—"Elsie, you can not expect what is coming! I am sure you have no suspicion of what I am about to confess to you?"

"No; but my heart tells me that it can be nothing very unworthy!"

"Is it not unworthy to deceive?"

"Circumstances alter even that, Maurice. Motives change the worth of our actions so greatly. How can you fear to tell *me* anything? Should I shrink from confiding aught to you?"

"I hope not!" he answered.

"Speak, then," she entreated; "this silence pains me, Maurice."

"In one moment you shall know all, dear one. I have prepared you for something unexpected?—for a surprise?"

"Yes, yes, Maurice!"

"We have both of us had to speak of Brookfield in this interview. My explanation involves another mention of him. In his wild eagerness to secure you for his own he became selfish, driving you to despair. Since that hour he has become a more thoughtful man, and less eager to have his own way, for he suffered, you can not think how much in losing you, Elsie."

"Why speak of him now, Maurice?" asked Elsie, confusedly thinking that Maurice's intimate relations with the family of the man to whom she was formerly betrothed had put him in possession of some secret concerning Lord Brookfield himself, which he had hesitated to declare.

"Because," continued Maurice, "he is so much mixed up with what I have to say. Do you know whither he went, Elsie, after he became a wanderer for your sake? Do you know where he is at this moment?"

She sighed, and a passing expression of regretful pity came into her countenance.

"In some far-off land, I fear!" she replied; "but I have in vain tried to discover where."

"I can tell you where he is!" cried Maurice, his voice breaking and faltering. "Elsie, he is here beside you now! I am Brookfield!"

And he fell on his knees beside her.

Had she heard aright? The glowing sky, the softly-waving acacia boughs, the saffron light tinting the heavens, the glittering, wondrous sea—this solitude in which he knelt before her—her very self—all—all seemed an unreal dream, as other visions swept down, blotting out, for a brief instant, the agitating present.

Instead of this far-off land of beauty, her old home rose before her, the stern visage of her father, the tender looks of her mother, her young sisters and brothers, each dear, familiar tie in the past, rushed to her memory. She had been ready to renounce them for one infinitely dear. But he whom she so loved—who was he?

She could not answer his cry—she had no word at command in the amazement which overwhelmed her.

Was it gladness also which rushed in full tide to her heart?—for if the presumed courier were indeed the young noble, she was restored to her mother—to all she loved!

And yet another great delight mingled with this tide of joy. Was it not for her sake alone that he had personated the courier, and worn this long disguise? He had spared nothing in his strife to win her love.

No wonder that silence sealed her lips in this moment of tender gladness.

"Elsie, speak to me!" he implored. "Oh, do not refuse to Maurice Brookfield the love you gave so fully to Maurice Bewley, the courier!"

Bewildered with happiness, overcome with emotion, she essayed to speak, and could not; but in her tender looks he read her answer.

"Now I am indeed a thousand times blest!" he cried, folding her in his arms.

And then she murmured, inarticulately, her happiness—her confiding trust.

"And you still love me?" she asked, a long while after. "You forgive me for my cruel flight after my promise to be yours, Maurice?"

"Dearest, that flight awakened me to my own selfishness—to all you must have suffered! In this supreme hour I am trebly repaid in deepest joy!"

Hand in hand they descended the hill together, and left the acacia avenue sleeping under the darkening saffron-hued sky. They gained the wooded slope where the orange groves embosomed the white villas of the European residents.

There stood the house from which Elsie had issued a penniless girl but an hour and a half ago—to which she now returned the promised bride of a proud young noble, restored to father, mother, position, family and friends!

The luxuriant creepers threw their greenery over the soft, white walls—And who was this in the veranda, watching eagerly for their approach?

No other than Lady Serly herself!

"There is your sister, Maurice!" whispered Elsie.

And, breaking from him, she ran forward joyfully.

A moment after she was folded in the arms of her ladyship, who articulated, brokenly through her sobs, "Is it, indeed, all right at last? Has what I have hoped and planned for been granted to us all?"

"Yes, dear Adelaide—and to you—mainly, we owe our happiness. It is, indeed, all right at last!" responded Brookfield, in a voice faltering with his deep feeling.

CHAPTER XII.

REJOICING.

"I RECOGNIZED you, dearest Elsie, during the first quarter of an hour of our unexpected meeting at Madame Laraye's. You did not remark my agitation; but it was because I felt sure that I had found you under the disguise of a widow that I pretended to be so particular about the mantle. I wished to make you speak more, to observe you, to satisfy a lingering doubt; and as I detected your emotion, the swift thought darted into my mind to devise some plan by which this dear brother of mine

might meet you in some well-planned disguise, for it seemed to me certain that, could you meet constantly, it must be that he would win your affection—that it was only your slight acquaintance with him, and the hurry in which your bridal was arranged, that had prevented your loving him. And when such an unexpected, un hoped-for thing occurred in Madame Laraye dismissing you, I at once invented the need for a maid to travel with me. Never shall I forget Brookfield's excitement, fear, and joy that day when I hastened home to disclose to him my scheme that I should inveigle you to enter my service, and that he should accompany us as courier. Can I ever be happy enough at the success which has crowned my device?"

It was a good deal later in the evening when Lady Serly said all this to Elsie; when the little party were more at ease, and could speak connectedly.

Mrs. Bartry, who, together with the house-keeper, Mrs. Stone, had been in the secret all along, came slyly in to offer their hearty congratulations.

Elsie saw that they had all been in the plot against her, and could now understand the constant kindness she had received as Lady Serly's maid.

How joyful was the contrast to this same hour but yesterday! Then she was still a dependent, with no hope of meeting her dear mother, of seeing home again! Then she had no absolute certainty of Maurice's devotion; now all was restored to her, and she rested assured in trust and happy love. Maurice, too, was hers, and doubly dear!

How they all vied with each other to make her know how dear she was to them! Old Lady Brookfield wept tears of joy over her, while Lady Serly knew not how sufficiently to express her happiness and delight.

The next morning dawned with a new life for Elsie. She had discarded her wig and widow's garment; and the courier had also laid aside his dark peruke and false beard. All now was rejoicing, and bright as the sunlight falling on the palmettoes and the orange groves.

But there was also much to be done. Lord Brookfield telegraphed the glad tidings to Elsie's father, while Elsie wrote to her mother, and immediate preparations were made for a return to England; for why should they linger in Algiers, since they had found something better than forgetfulness of former sorrows—the joy that was given them in its stead.

It was a busy morning to Lady Serly, to Lady Brookfield, and to Mrs. Bartry; but Elsie and Maurice wandered out to the acacia avenue for a short time, to revisit the scene of last night's bliss. Yet they would not linger too long even in that enchanted spot, for they

awaited with anxiety, mixed with hope, the return answer to Maurice's telegram.

And it was not too long delayed. Sir Bertram and Lady Fairdown would set off instantly, and meet them at Nice, to escort their daughter to England.

Despite the assurance of future happiness, Elsie could not help trembling somewhat at the approaching interview with her father. What would he say to her? How would he receive her?

It needed the supporting presence of her betrothed to give her courage.

Poor Elsie! But she was afraid without cause. In truth, Sir Bertram was so overcome with delight at the happy turn of affairs, that he had never, since his own wedding-day, been in so good a temper, and continually called Lady Fairdown "my love." Besides, though it was easy to scold Elsie Fairdown, it was difficult to do so now that she was to be transformed into a peeress.

Thus, when at length the dreaded meeting took place, and Lord Brookfield led her forward, clasping her hand in his, Sir Bertram forgot to be angry, and greeted her in his most pompously affectionate manner.

"My own dear girl, if I had only known your feelings better—if I had only known! Your father loved you too well to say one word to distress you! I shall keep this happy day as a joyful anniversary all the rest of my life!"

And then he kissed his daughter's forehead several times.

Elsie could only articulate, "Papa—oh, papa!" and then burst into tears; for her mother, overpowered by emotion, was waiting to embrace her.

After this embarrassing but joyful meeting, Elsie's sorrow was over. Sir Bertram was so full of the arrangements to be made for the forthcoming wedding that he actually joked with his wife.

"We'll leave it all to the young couple this time, my love," said he, "or the bride may run away a second time, perhaps, and Brookfield may have to personate a distressed tutor, or some other fascinating character, to win her consent once more. Leave them to themselves this time, my dear, and then nothing will go wrong."

"Our darling child is happy, Bertram," said Lady Fairdown, "and would be as reluctant to fly now as before she was eager to escape. Dear girl, she has indeed fair prospects and a bright future."

"She will be a peeress some day," ejaculated the baronet, with triumph; "and Brookfield is a capital fellow, besides being very clever and cultivated. And, my love, it will give us added consequence in the county, our daughter filling the first position in it. Considering that posi-

tion, my love, I really think it will be more to our dignity to suppress this romantic story of the courier. Therefore, I enjoin on you the strictest silence, and shall observe it myself."

"Very well, Bertram," replied her ladyship.

But the romantic story could not be suppressed. Mrs. Bartry had long since written to Mrs. Stone a triumphant account of the success of his lordship's courtship in disguise, and that worthy member of Lady Serly's household had nearly written her fingers off in disseminating the tidings.

The news had flown to the remotest corner of the county in which the Brookfield property and Thornley House were situated, and Elsie was welcomed back to her home with wild demonstrations of joy by the villagers; triumphal arches being erected, with all sorts of floral devices, amid which figured the words, "Long live the noble courier and his betrothed bride," and "Love will still be lord of all."

"How things do ooze out!" exclaimed Sir Bertram. "Who would have thought of these people getting hold of the truth, and, the very day of our arrival at home again?"

Elsie could laugh now, and she did, most heartily, in musical mirth, exclaiming, "Dear papa, you forget that the two old servants at Lady Serly's were in the secret from the first!"

Thus, instead of being scolded, Elsie took her place as a heroine in real life; and the neighboring aristocracy, out of three adjoining counties, came flocking to the pretty old country church at Thornley on Elsie's wedding-day, to see the girl married who had fled from her rich and titled suitor, and had afterward learned to love him so devotedly under the disguise of a poor courier.

And not only did Elsie take her place as a

heroine, but she got a double set of wedding presents.

People who had sent their bridal gifts so recently thought they must add some token of goodwill for so fair a bride, who went to the altar surrounded with such a halo of romance, and in most instances, when they sent once more the original offering, it was accompanied by an additional one.

As for Lady Fairdown, happiness renewed her youth.

"To have you so happily settled near me, darling, will be constant joy!" she said.

"Yes, dearest mother! I am the most fortunate girl that ever became a bride."

"And I the most fortunate, the very happiest of bridegrooms!" said Maurice, stealing his arm around his beautiful bride.

These few words were spoken in Lady Fairdown's own boudoir, whither she had retired for a moment or two with her much-loved daughter ere Elsie descended to take her farewell of the assembled guests below.

Ten minutes after, the youthful bride and the radiant bridegroom were whirled out of sight amid a shower of rice, white blossoms, and satin slippers, and with the good wishes of their many friends.

"Maurice, there are the Gray Towers!" said Elsie, softly, as the old ruins came in sight.

He folded her in his arms.

"Dear old place! I think it brought me back to life after I first lost you, Elsie. It was your letter, sending back the deeds, which roused me from despair, and from sinking down hopelessly. We'll go to the Gray Towers the very day after we return, dearest."

Then the carriage whirled them out of sight of the Gray Towers, and Lord and Lady Brookfield began their joyful wedded life together.

THE END.

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